

# **RENEGOTIATING IDENTITY: RE-AUTHORING NARRATIVES POST INFIDELITY AND DIVORCE**

by

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## DECLARATION

I, Penelope Joy Day, declare that **RENEGOTIATING IDENTITY: RE-AUTHORING NARRATIVES POST INFIDELITY AND DIVORCE** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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SIGNATURE

20 November 2007

## ABSTRACT

This qualitatively oriented Practical Theology research journey, informed by postmodernism and social constructionism, was based on a narrative enquiry into the healing and renegotiation of identity of five “faithful spouses” post infidelity and divorce. These conversations occurred within a small group context, where narratives were spoken and witnessed (pastoral therapeutic gatherings), and were aimed at enabling the participants to remember and re-author preferred identities and new ways of being. This dissertation attempts to bring together the narratives of the participants, the literature, narrative therapy and pastoral care.

My research curiosity was prompted by my mother’s experience of divorce, and by the myriad number of conversations I have had with both “infidels” and “faithful spouses” in my pastoral practice. This research journey examines the process of co-creating, along with my fellow travellers (research participants), a viable model of divorce recovery in the face of infidelity and divorce.

**Key terms:** Narrative approach, Practical theology, ethical pastoral care, cura animarum, social constructionism, , reflexivity, katharsis, divorce, divorce recovery, infidelity, infidel, faithful spouse, rite-of-passage, discourse, pastoral therapeutic gathering, witnessing.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THE RESEARCH JOURNEY**

#### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

This research journey aims to explore the identity constructions and reconstructions of the so-called “faithful spouse” in the face of infidelity and divorce. My interest in the topic of re-authoring identity post infidelity and divorce has been fed by four sources: my own story as a child of divorce, my vocation as a narrative pastoral therapist, my awareness of the ever-increasing prevalence of infidelity and divorce and my active participation in a local community of pastoral care, Christ Church Constantia, South Africa.

At the age that I am now, my mother divorced my father. Sometimes I find myself visited by curiosity, and filled with questions, about my mother’s story of marriage and divorce, and now, because she has died, I have no way of hearing her story. I do remember that at the time of the divorce two older brothers had left home, and my brother and I lived with my mom. Finances were a problem as my mother received only R30 per month maintenance for each of us. The other outstanding memory is that my mother, a minister’s daughter and regular church-goer up until the divorce, never again took communion as she felt that, as a divorced person, she was no longer welcome at the communion table. Her church attendance diminished to annual Easter and Christmas visits. I often wonder if pastoral care was present in my mother’s life during those days and years. My father, now aged 87, has told me some of his story, but I know that his story, and his story of marriage and divorce, is not my mother’s story. Infidelity was not cited as a reason for the divorce.

In the last few years, in my practice as a pastoral therapist, I have had numerous conversations with people who have discovered that their spouse has been sexually unfaithful. During the course of these conversations, a number have remained married and a number have divorced. Sometimes divorce has been the outcome of negotiation and collaboration and sometimes divorce has been imposed. Research indicates that accounts of failed marriages consistently reveal that one partner wants and pushes for the divorce more than the other partner (Cuber & Harroff 1965; Federico 1979; Goode 1956; Hunt 1966; Weiss 1975). Federico (1979:94) reports that even when

a couple is engaged in a decision making process as to the viability of the marriage, in conjoint therapy, “it is reasonable to suspect that a decision has already been made by at least one partner” and that the other partner “may never reach the point of concluding that the relationship is either unworkable or not worth repairing”. Research on the effects of initiator status is marked by conflicting results and conclusions (Rossiter 1991:141). My experience and conversations with people whose spouse has left the marriage to pursue another relationship is that a particular wounding takes place. Federico (1979:104) writes of the “long-lasting psychic scars that take the form of self-doubt”. The wounding of infidelity sustained by the so-called “faithful spouse” is exacerbated at being “left” by the infidel (Botha 1998:51). Botha (1998:51) uses the term “faithful spouse” to refer to the person that is faithful to his/her marital partner, and “infidel” to refer to the unfaithful partner. Botha writes that “these terms are widely used in the literature (Pitman 1990; Brown 1991; Kaslow 1993)” and they are, therefore, used in this dissertation. Kitson and Sussman (cited in Edwards and Saunders 1981:386) explain that “commitment” or “attachment” is greater among spouses who are left than among those who leave, fostering a lower sense of psychological well-being among the former. I find myself in agreement with Goode (1956:123) that “the spouse who is left has been found to have the most difficult postmarital period”.

In 2002 (the latest available statistics) 31370 divorces were recorded in South Africa, affecting 34212 minor children. For the total population of South Africa, about 22% of recorded divorces occurred in marriages of less than five years duration, and 28% among those of between five and nine years. For all population groups in South Africa, recorded divorces comprised mainly of marriages that were solemnized through civil rather than religious rites. Traditional and customary marriages are not registered and therefore no statistics are available for those marriages and possible divorces in the 2002 census. The passing of the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act, 1998 (Act no. 120 of 1998) by parliament, will now recognize previously unrecognized customary and traditional marriages in law and will therefore register these marriages. However, religious marriages, especially Muslim religious marriages, are still to be recognized and recorded (StatsSA 2002:xxi). Only Christian and Jewish/Hebrew rites have been recognized to date. The divorce rates for whites was 1361 per 100 000 married couples, followed by Indians/Asians (645 per 100 000 married couples), coloureds (673 per 100 000 married couples) and Africans (174 per 100 000). Undocumented cases of abandonment do not appear in the statistics nor do divorces that have been granted by religious or traditional

authorities outside the civil courts. The low divorce rate for Africans could be attributed to registration excluding reporting of traditional and customary marriage dissolution. In the official statistics no reasons are cited for divorce, and my research has not revealed any statistics for infidelity as a causal factor. Pittman (1993:35) writes: “We don’t know how many people are unfaithful; if people will lie to their own husband or wife, they surely aren’t going to be honest with poll takers.” (See 2.2.4 for further discussion of infidelity as a causal factor in divorce).

I have wondered how many divorces have been rendered invisible by the lack of statutory data. How many divorces really took place in South Africa in 2002? How many of those involved received pastoral care? Motivated by curiosity I sent the following email to my local church, Christ Church Constantia:

I am busy writing my research dissertation and I was wondering if it would be possible for me to have some data from the Church records, if it is available, and with Keith’s permission:  
How many members do we have?  
How many marriages took place in 2005?  
Would we have any idea how many members divorced in 2005?

I received the following response:

We have 684 members.  
We had 48 weddings last year.  
Keith says he will need to apply his mind to the number of divorces as not everyone lets us know!!

This correspondence confirms the invisibility of accurate divorce statistics, and the resonance of the local context in relation to the national context.

I have only been a member at Christ Church Constantia for two years. The church has an active pastoral care programme: for the bereaved, for the ill, for the elderly, for new members, for baptism, for about to be weds and for marriage enrichment. My experience in my own pastoral practice has made me aware that our church is lacking in providing a divorce recovery pastoral programme, and yet I am also aware that people attending divorce recovery workshops at neighbouring churches report that they are not as beneficial as they had hoped. This realization made me curious about the pastoral needs of people facing the emotional scarring and negative identity conclusions engendered by infidelity and divorce, and encouraged me to begin reading and researching in this field.

## 1.2 RESEARCH CURIOSITY

As a pastoral therapist I encounter many married men and women whose lives are currently adversely affected by infidelity. I meet with people who are known as the infidels: the person who is having the affair, committing the adultery, being unfaithful (these terms are further defined in Chapter Two). I also meet with people who are known as the faithful spouse. Confronted by infidelity, some people choose divorce and others choose to stay married. At all times I hold both an awareness of the complexity and multidimensionality of the situations people find themselves in, the radical plurality of life, together with an awareness of my own values and a respect for the position and values of the person in conversation with me. Bird (2000: 278-279) writes:

We are confronted by ambiguity, contradictions and opposing representations of the self and others. We witness moments of profound change where individuals find the strength to oppose institutionally supported ideas and values by setting a different life course. Moment by moment in the therapeutic conversation we engage with the ethics of the everyday. This engagement demonstrates a willingness to continually negotiate meanings, including identifying and negotiating the effects of the ethics that guide our lives.

Considering the myriad therapeutic conversations with both infidels and faithful spouses a multitude of research curiosities exist for further exploration. I have not chosen to engage in research with the faithful because they are “good” and the infidels are “bad”. Both suffer, both are troubled and wounded, both have often lost hope. Van Arkel (2000:189) explains:

Pastoral therapists work from a spiritual and theological perspective, caring for people who are troubled, hurt, abused or oppressed, using the resources of forgiveness and renewal to heal and make whole, helping them to discover the possibility and presence of God’s grace in their lives. They provide a ministry of presence, with affirmation and hope. By helping people reconnect their own narratives to what Gerkin (1986:30) calls the grounding narratives of faith, it gives human life meaning, affirms people, helps them to discover self-worth and rekindle hope (Van den Blink 1995:205).

It is the specific wounding of the faithful spouse in the light of infidelity (referred to in the introduction) upon whom divorce is inflicted, or who chooses divorce and the healing thereof, which captured my attention. In the course of pastoral therapeutic conversations I have become aware that faithful spouses face numerous challenges as they seek to navigate the territory post infidelity and divorce. This challenge includes the negotiation and re-authoring of preferred

identity conclusions. This research project is interested in exploring healing from the stigmata of past wounds (Foucault 1995), specifically the wounds inflicted on the identity of the faithful spouse by infidelity and divorce.

**The first research curiosity is an exploration of the effects of infidelity and divorce on the identity of the faithful spouse. The second curiosity is an exploration of how a narrative therapeutic approach helps to inform pastoral therapeutic gatherings with faithful spouses.**

### **1.3 RESEARCH AIMS**

Flowing from the research curiosities detailed above, are the following research aims:

- 1) To provide a narrative therapeutic group context (pastoral therapeutic gatherings) in which the effects of infidelity and divorce on the faithful spouses' identity could be made visible.
- 2) To explore the effects of witnessing the stories of infidelity and divorce in a group of faithful spouses.

### **1.4 CARING FOR THE FAITHFUL SPOUSE – A PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE**

Divorced people often find themselves marginalised and ostracised, even within their church/faith communities. Perhaps this is why people are happy to marry in church, but omit to inform their pastor or local church community when divorce takes place. A divorced person often feels like an “outlier” within a church community; some communities even “shun” those who have divorced. Rossouw (1993:903) asserts that “[t]heologies and Christian practices that cause systematic or prolonged suffering and degradation can hardly be worthy of the name ‘Christian’.... Christians of all kinds should therefore not only be sensitive to suffering in general, but should be especially sensitive to the practical consequences that theological perspectives and belief practices might have.” Rossouw (1993:902) cites “[c]oncern for the marginalized” as a significant challenge for theology in a postmodern culture and reminds us that God has a “special concern for those whose human value and dignity is denied by society.... In the story of Jesus this is demonstrated through his concern for those who were considered as social, economic, cultural and even religious outcasts of society....” Brueggemann (1993:12)

warns of the “pastoral crisis of social displacement” and the opportunity it provides for the church and its pastors. Divorced people who find themselves socially displaced within a church community are often rendered invisible and voiceless. I wonder if this is what happened to my mother, and countless others like her, who were told that as divorced women they were no longer welcome at the communion table.

De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio (1994:12) explain that “‘doing Theology’ can never be a neutral exercise, nor can it be a substitute for faith and commitment. It assumes faith, and it requires commitment.” Practical theology, doing theology in various contexts and situations, involves more than practice, it involves praxis. De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio (1994:12) explain: “‘Praxis’ is a German word which is usually translated into English as ‘practice’. But when used in theology and other disciplines, it means action which arises out of and contributes to critical reflection.” Praxis is the goal of practical theology. Heitink (1999:9) reflects that “for centuries, the praxis of society has been influenced by the Christian tradition” and that Christian tradition has been “subject to the influence of divergent developments within society”. Thus, according to Heitink, practical theology does not have the church, but rather society, as its horizon. As a practical theologian I am invited to critically reflect on pastoral therapy as a participatory process, an inter-subjective collaboration, where oppressive discourses can be challenged and ethical ways of living can be negotiated. The words of Louw (1998:20, 21) reflect the seedbed of my call to this work:

Cura animarum is the classical formulation for pastoral work.... Cura animarum describes a very special process of caring for human life because it is created by God and belongs to God.

Clinebell (1984:61) explains that “*therapeuo* means both ‘to serve’ (a divinity) and to care for, treat (medically), heal, restore”. I chose to become a student of practical theology, specializing in pastoral care, because I value praxis, particularly the praxis of caring, the cura animarum. The idea of a contextual theology of praxis informs and underpins my research approach. Ackermann (1996: 34) offers the following clarification of this position:

...critical, committed, constructive, collaborative and accountable reflection on the theories and praxis of struggle and hope for the mending of creation based on the stories and experiences of women/marginalized and oppressed people.

My commitment to ethical pastoral care and research invites me not to care “for” but to care “with” people in need of care, not to research “about” but to research “with”, and to take a position towards care as a social practice socially constructed by care-givers as well as care receivers (Kotzé & Kotzé 2001:7). This position dictated my approach to this research project. I did not “lead” the group, or care for the group from a hierarchical position; instead I “facilitated” the group from within the group. I did not care for the group; we all cared with each other.

## **1.5 RESEARCH APPROACH**

My research approach was informed by the aims of this research project: providing a narrative therapeutic group context in which the effects of infidelity and divorce on the faithful spouses’ identity could be made visible and an exploration of the effects of witnessing the stories of infidelity and divorce in a group of faithful spouses.

### **1.5.1 Qualitative research**

Denise Ackermann (2003:xvi) postulates: “I believe that theology should be an *organic* enterprise, one that is close to the ground, that can nurture the fragility of our lives as we struggle to put out shoots of new growth.” As a master’s student of practical theology, with specialization in pastoral therapy, I realized that this research enterprise, of exploring healing from “the stigmata of past experiences” (Foucault 1995) (the wounds of infidelity and divorce) should be organic. Qualitative research is complex and multi-dimensional and its strength lies in “understanding context, diversity, nuance and process” (Mason 2002:i). Mason continues by stating that qualitative research cannot be done “by rote or recipe”, and it therefore provides, to my mind, a model for organic research.

Qualitative research is also a good fit with my epistemological position of postmodernism and social constructionism. Both postmodernism and qualitative research reject essentialism (a single, monolithic truth) and grand-narratives and invite a hermeneutical position, with an interest in the personal, contextual, pluralistic, multi-dimensional and interpretive. Merriam (1998:6) confirms: “Qualitative researchers *are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.” Language is seen as “performative”, as a social activity producing knowledge. To my mind, it

therefore makes sense to use qualitative, rather than quantitative methodology to research an area where language is of key importance and within a hermeneutic discipline like theology (Mouton 1996:133). Burr (1995:7) extrapolates: “When people talk to each other the world gets constructed.” The social construction of identity is a key concept within social constructionism and Denzin and Lincoln (1994:4) confirm that qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied and the situational constraints that shape inquiry.

### **1.5.2 Participatory action research (PAR)**

McTaggart (1997:1) explains that participatory action research

...might be described as a broad *church*, movement or family of activities ... *church* probably connotes community, solidarity and commitment... *church* also invokes questions of ethics, morality, values and interest that attend the research act ... it expresses a recognition that all research methodologies are implicitly political in character.

Participatory research differs from action research. Action research emanates from the work of sociologist Kurt Lewin (1946) and has been used in a variety of contexts, including industry, education, social psychology and community affairs (McTaggart1997:27).. According to Cohen and Manion (cited in Banister et al 1994:110) action research tends to “focus on precise knowledge applied to a specific problem in a specific setting ... with an ultimate objective being to improve practice”. Ethics in action research has been fore-grounded after the infamous Milgram experiments (1974) and the concern with power relations between researcher and researched has been highlighted.

Per definition and practically participatory research has usually been oriented to actions that people take to improve the circumstances of their own lives. “Participatory” emphasizes the fact that the participants collaborate in, co-research and co-create their lives. “Action” highlights and emphasises that it is the participants’ own activities which are meant to be informed by the research project, and not the future aims of the researcher. As a primary aim of this research is to explore and render visible the effects of infidelity and divorce on the identity of the faithful spouse, participatory action research appears to be an obvious choice as it allows understanding



and insight into the experience and “life world” of the participants. McTaggart (1997:5) succinctly states: “participatory action research is research done by the people for themselves”.

Divorce and infidelity are political. The divorced often find themselves rendered invisible and marginalised, particularly within a church context, as discussed above. Participatory action research is political because it is about people changing themselves and their circumstances, and about informing this change as it happens. As the pastoral therapeutic group of faithful spouses told their stories and witnessed the stories of the other participants the effects of this process were observed, explored and documented. In this way reflective research became a collective critique (McTaggart 1997:6).

As a practical theologian engaged in social inquiry (specifically in healing the wounds and constructing a preferred life and identity post infidelity and divorce) I agree with the writing of Kemms, Fay and Hall as cited in McTaggart (1997:22) that we need to work practically and theoretically to help people explore their suffering, to give voice to the conditions that have disfigured their lives and identities and to use these processes of enlightenment to help develop social movements “that can change the conditions of social life which maintain irrationality, injustice and incoherent and unsatisfying forms of existence”. Mouton (2001:151) confirms that “most types of PAR have an explicit (political) commitment to the empowerment of participants and to changing the social conditions of the participants”.

## **1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN**

“In participatory or collaborative research the people studied *make decisions* about the study format and data analysis”, writes Reinharz (1992:181). I need to acknowledge that in the early stages of the research journey authentic participation did not take place. I had decided on a research topic in the light of my personal and professional curiosity, I had prescribed the aims of the research and I had made tentative decisions around the structure (individual conversations followed by pastoral therapeutic groups). Much of what I had decided needed to be negotiated with the participants. Kurt Lewin (1946, 1952) describes action research as proceeding in a “spiral of steps”: the cyclic nature of the Lewinian approach recognises the need for action plans to be reflexive and responsive (McTaggart 1997:27). Authentic participation may almost be seen as constituting the method. Rajeesh Tandon (1988:13) identifies three determinants of authentic

participation which I held as central values throughout the research journey: the first is to be aware of the participants' role in setting the agenda of the inquiry, secondly, the participants' participation in the data collection and analysis; and thirdly the participants' control over the use of the outcomes and the completed process.

### **1.6.1 Sampling and selection strategy: Voluntary research participants**

“A controversy in both mainstream and feminist interviewing is the comparative benefit of being a stranger or a friend to the people one is studying”, states Reinharz (1992:26). Within the last few years I have had conversations with many people navigating the territory of infidelity and divorce. My initial thinking was to invite those with whom I had journeyed to be research participants. Then I wondered if they would feel pressurized by the relationship to take part. I wondered if it would be hard for them to refuse because they felt in some way obligated. I was concerned that if they agreed they might be forceful in the group because they felt privileged. (This had happened previously when I was facilitating a group and a client attended – making obvious our “close relations” (Reinharz 1992:26) and giving the other participants the impression of a privileged position within the group.) I initially decided not to take up Denise Segura's position of “interviewer as friend” (Reinharz 1992:27) because of the above considerations.

I asked our parish priest, Keith Griffiths, for permission to advertise in our parish newsletter for participants. Keith had been very interested in and supportive of the proposed research and indicated his willingness to promote the research project and to encourage potential respondents to call me for further information. It was, however, not my intention to restrict the sample to members of the Christ Church community, but to open participation to a wider universe. I hoped to include in the sample men and women, of any age, people who had been divorced for many years, and people divorced within the last year. I was aware that sampling in qualitative research is “an organic practice, in the sense that it is something which grows and develops throughout the research process” (Mason 2002:126). I hoped for a sample size of not less than six, and not greater than eight; a “relevant range” in relation to the wider universe. The response I received was limited, and one of the volunteers was going to be away during April and May, so I contacted Abigail, who had consulted with me in my capacity as narrative pastoral therapist and she agreed to participate in the study. My sample was made up of two men and three women.

## **1.6.2 Data generating, gathering and capturing: All journeys require a map**

Research journeys require planning. However, a participatory action research model requires the participation, collaboration and negotiation of all participants. I held my ideas lightly: they were not firm intentions and commitments, and I was quite prepared to be led by the participants. Tandon (cited by McTaggart 1997:6) warns that “the whole process ... even the research methodology itself may be reinterpreted and reconstituted by participants”. Comments on this process may be found in Chapter 5. The collection of data took place through face-to-face interviews, field notes, pastoral therapeutic gatherings, audio-tapes and transcripts. With the permission of the participants I audio-taped our weekly meetings. I then transcribed the tapes and emailed the written transcripts to the participants. This allowed the participants to verify, clarify, edit and comment on the transcripts, which then became our data.

### **1.6.2.1 Individual face-to-face interviews**

My first step was to have an individual face-to-face interview with each participant. This initial meeting, during which the participants gave voice to their stories, and during which I shared my aims, curiosities and hopes for the research project, gave the volunteers an opportunity to meet me, and to reflect on whether they would like to participate in the study. I also gave each participant an information sheet and a consent form (see Appendices 1 and 2). During this time I was guided by the words of Sue Todd (2001:70):

I particularly appreciated the care that has gone into the preparation for these gatherings – especially the consultation process prior to these events.... The program for the gathering that has been created through prior consultation also means that key themes will not vanish.

These conversations were not tape-recorded, but notes were taken. “By keeping a record of the main decisions and events during the fieldwork process, you construct a historical record of the whole process to which you can return ...” writes Mouton (2001:7). Mouton (2001:110) defines “fieldwork” as “that part of the research process in which the researcher has to leave his or her study or computer and enter the real world ... in order to collect, select and analyse data.”

All those I met with, after a time for reflection, came back to me and said they would like to participate. After our initial conversation Darron sent me an email:

A BIG thank you for the time that you gave me yesterday. I really appreciate it and I gained some new insights as well. Count me in.

#### **1.6.2.2 Pastoral therapeutic gatherings**

After the individual face-to-face interviews the group process began. It was my hope, intention and commitment that as we listened deconstructively to each other's stories of infidelity and divorce the effects of those phenomena on the faithful spouse's identity would be made visible. The effects constituted the data in terms of the first aim of this project which was to provide a narrative therapeutic group context in which *the effects of infidelity and divorce on the faithful spouse's identity could be made visible*.

Six of us gathered each Monday evening. Five of the participants shared the common bond of being the "so-called" faithful spouse in a marital relationship which had been shattered due to the infidelity of their spouse. Four of the participants were already divorced; the fifth had been separated for two and a half years. I was the sixth member of the group, and took the position of facilitator and researcher. My commitment to the decentred, yet influential position (White 1997) which informs the therapist's position in narrative conversations allowed me to engage with the group in a collaborative way where the power relation between researcher and participants was rendered visible. I was also very aware of my position as a "married" person in a group of "divorced" people.

In our first group meeting we all participated in creating guidelines for our times together. The group agreed that I could tape the sessions, and that during the course of the week I would transcribe the tapes and email copies of the transcriptions for the group's perusal, correction and comment. As Joan did not have access to email I printed out copies for her, which she collected each week. Confidentiality was highlighted. It was agreed that copies of the transcripts would also be sent to my supervisor and his comments were made available to the group. I invited the group to consider whether they would like to make use of pseudonyms in the final draft of the document. Two of the members opted for and chose pseudonyms and three decided to retain their own names.

As many of the group said that they had found extensive reading to be useful, I made copies of some of the papers I had used in the literature review for the group, and I brought a stack of additional papers which formed a “library” from which the group could borrow articles of particular interest.

The gatherings took place at the pace the participants themselves permitted (Park: 2001:1998 cited in Reason & Bradbury 2001). We agreed to meet for a period of six weeks, and chose “Poustinia” (the place from which I consult) as a venue, as it was centrally positioned (the participants came from both the northern and southern suburbs of Cape Town). The group agreed to meet from 19h00, for a period of two hours. We never did manage to keep that guideline in place, the conversation often carried on longer, and much chatting took place over refreshments after the more structured part of the evening, confirming Todd’s words: “these gatherings offer the potential for a community to grow around the theme” (2001:70). We wrote the dates of our meeting on a flipchart (skipping a week because Abigail was going to be away and the group did not want to meet without her) and each person chose a date for their conversation. The conversation was to be a typical narrative type conversation between myself and the person whose life was to be centred that week. Behan (1999:24) comments:

These types of conversations give people an opportunity to truly engage with the stories of their lives. As active participants, they take a position on their experience and the meaning they make of their lives.

I had emailed Darron in the week preceding our first meeting: “I was wondering if you would be the first ‘volunteer’ – could I interview you this coming Monday in the group process?” He responded: “No problem.” During the week after the conversation with Darron he sent me an email: “A BIG thank you for a very special evening last Monday. I really got a lot out of it and felt very empowered by the journey.”

The second aim of this research project was *to explore the effects of witnessing the stories of infidelity and divorce in a group of faithful spouses*. For the first five weeks it was agreed that I would have a conversation with each participant, with the remaining participants forming a “reflecting team.” I wanted to create a context, not only where stories could be told, but where people could find an audience to witness the stories of their lives. This type of community assists its members in making meaning of their identity by seeing themselves and their world through

multiple lenses, and contributes to a richer description of the members' lives. White (1995) has outlined how reflecting team methodology can be applied for this purpose of linking lives around shared themes. When a reflecting team is made up of peers, rather than psychotherapy "professionals", the group becomes both a reflecting team and a community of concern (Madigan & Epston 1995). It was also my hope that in creating a space where narratives could be both told and witnessed, that the group members descriptions of themselves and their lives could be thickened in ways that would enable them to step into new ways of seeing and being. I introduced the group to the reflecting team concept and offered them three simple guidelines. The first was to listen carefully, making notes if required, especially for resonance with their own experience, for images of life and identity that were triggered. The second was to listen with curiosity and respect and thirdly, to listen with a readiness to acknowledge strengths and resilience.

Each week we began with a period of "checking-in"; a brief go-around that provided space for hearing each person's voice, reflections on the week past, comments and possible concerns. The bulk of the evening was used for the narrative conversation and during this time I took the position of interviewer. After the group member at the centre of the conversation had completed his or her telling, the reflecting team would offer their comments, each person speaking from his or her own experience about the conversation they had just witnessed. During this process I took the role of facilitator, a role which required a very light touch, as I found that the linking of lives around shared themes happened quite readily with little intervention on my part. In this way the effects of witnessing were gathered each week as each participant spoke about their resonance with the story of the person who was interviewed. Carey and Russell (2003a:15) explain:

Outsider witnessing is a key aspect of narrative practice. It is not simply an add on. One of the key underpinnings of narrative practice is that our identities are formed in relationship with others. When someone is endeavouring to author new stories about their lives, stories that are free from the constraining effects of various problems, then witnesses will be required – witnesses who can powerfully acknowledge and authenticate the steps taken, the skills and knowledge this has required, the intentions and hopes involved ....

Structuralist understanding of identity results in the concept of an essential self, whereas poststructuralist understandings account for identity as a social and public achievement. Carey and Russell's words clearly and eloquently reflect the synergy between poststructuralist thinking and narrative practice. Narrative practice is based upon the belief that our sense of self is socially

constructed and exists in relationship to other people: our identities are socially constructed, forged through our relationships with other people. This notion is captured by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, when, speaking of the African concept of Ubuntu, he coined the expression: “People become people through other people” (Morrison 2002:5). For both Emma and Abigail, respect made its presence felt through the witnessing process. In her feedback Emma commented: “It has been beneficial to me to have been able to share with two men and two women – who have respected me in that I had a story to tell.” In answer to the question: How did you feel about the format? Abigail wrote: “Great, this worked well and added an *evening of respect* for each participant, by giving them the floor and the time without being deflected by others’ comments while they were being interviewed.”

We agreed that on the sixth Monday we would evaluate our time together. How this was to be done became a consultative process. The effectiveness of narrative therapy as an approach was also reflected on in this final group discussion. Michael White (1997:139) comments:

It is also common narrative practice for therapists to consult persons about their experience of these conversations after the event – persons are encouraged to reflect on their experiences of particular meetings ... and on the outcome of these meetings ... In this way, persons contribute to distinguishing the more helpful conversations and relational practices from the less helpful....

The group asked me to email some questions for reflection during the week and they undertook to provide a written response, either using all, some or none of the questions (see Appendix 3). In addition, each participant offered a verbal comment to the group. The idea of definitional ceremony, as proposed by Barbara Myerhoff (1982) and expanded by Michael White (1995), shaped my facilitation of our closing evening. Both writers talk of authenticity as “the outcome of a social process where one’s preferred identity claims are acknowledged” (Behan 1999:18). The group also decided that they would like to meet again, and settled on a date for a bring and braai. These get-togethers have now become quarterly events.

### **1.6.2.3 Data analysis and interpretation**

Merriam (1998: 156) confirms that the process of data analysis is “highly intuitive: a researcher cannot always explain where an insight (that might later be a finding) came from ... the real learning can only take place in the doing”. Merriam (1998:162) also emphasises “the right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it *simultaneously* with data collection”. The transcripts,

emailed and discussed after each gathering, make visible the analysis and interpretation of the data. Epston (1994: 31) confirms the efficacy of the written word:

Conversation is, by its very nature, ephemeral.... But the words in a letter don't fade and disappear the way conversation does; they endure through time and space, bearing witness....

As the participants engaged in reading and checking the transcripts, they automatically and simultaneously collaborated in the data analysis and interpretation.

In one sense all qualitative data analysis is content analysis in that it is the content of interviews, field notes and documents that is analysed (Merriam 1998:160): it involves the conceptual processing of verbal or visual data (observations). Because this project constitutes participatory action research, “the data analysis is viewed as a collaborative effort between the researcher and the participants” (Mouton 2001:151). Participatory action research is about the conscientious objectification of concrete experience and change and it therefore presents the voices, views and interpretations of the participants.

The initial specific focus of this project was to note the effects of infidelity and divorce on the identity of the faithful spouse. A second focus was the effects of the witnessing on the participants. Raw data related to these effects were gathered, coded, organised and indexed. Emerging themes were sometimes identified by the participants themselves (Merriam 1998:185). The effectiveness of a narrative approach was reflected on and evaluated and comments relating to this were gathered, analysed and reported on.

#### **1.6.2.4 Interpreting the data and presenting the research findings**

Authentic participation and collaboration in all phases of the research process is vital, and presents the opportunity for the participants to work together as “knowing subjects and agents of change and improvement” (McTaggart 1997:39). Knowledge production in participatory action research places an emphasis on participants as responsible, autonomous agents developing their own understandings. As the participants engage dialectically they “prefigure, foreshadow and provoke” changes which will resonate in the broader fabric of interactions that characterise their



every day lived experience. In this way the participants are the main beneficiaries of the research they have co-created.

Once I began writing the dissertation I emailed the chapters to the participants for their comments and final approval. All of the research participants were invited to read the drafts and to give feedback. Errors and omissions were corrected. Content and writing style were critiqued. Decisions were made around anonymity and disclosure. As co-researchers we conjointly reflected on the research as it became written text. A critical reflection of the work was important and mistakes needed to be identified. In these ways a reflexive text was created.

“Finding one’s voice” is a crucial process of research and writing and healing (Reinharz 1992:39). In this dissertation I present the voices of the participants, using their own words and grammar, offering their voices “written as spoken”, uncensored and unedited, rather than rephrased as “correct” English (Reinharz 1992:39). In the same way, reflecting the integrity of self-reflexive reporting, I write in the first person singular, in contrast to the conventional third-person or passive voice, allowing my voice to frame the written text. Retaining the veracity of this approach, I also refer to the participants as participants, rather than as “subjects”.

## **1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Mason (2002:41) highlights the need for research to be intellectually coherent and compelling to the same degree as it is moral and ethical. The following ethical considerations constituted my compass as I negotiated the research journey with fellow-travellers.

### **1.7.1 Fellow-travellers: Do no harm, participatory consciousness and katharsis**

A critical and ethical consideration was the strong desire to uphold the maxim *Primum non nocere* – “Above all [or first] do no harm”. This meant ensuring that participants were in no way re-traumatized. Skidmore (2002:47), a researcher in the field of divorce recovery, warns:

Writing the stories was a traumatic experience for many of the group and one which brought back painful memories of the ending of the relationship. For many of the group, telling the story was experienced as a backward step in the story of their divorce.

Waldegrave (1990:7) explains:

We view the process of therapy as sacred. People come, often in a very vulnerable state, and share some of their deepest and most painful experiences. For us, these stories are gifts that are worthy of honour.

Both of the above quotes highlight the vulnerability of the research participants and the risk involved in participating in a research project of this nature. As I spoke to each of the participants, either on the phone or at the beginning of our individual meeting, I introduced the topics of re-traumatisation and hesitancy and fear. We discussed the need for each of us to remain vigilant about distress, and I asked each participant if they would be able to indicate to me at any given time if they felt their participation in the gatherings was causing more distress than benefit. White (1995:87) believes it is possible and desirable for people to find options for giving voice to their experience in ways that are profoundly healing for them. White (1995:87) emphasizes the importance of consulting people about how the “re-interpretation and expressions of their experience is affecting the shape of their lives, and about what they understand to be the limitations and possibilities associated with our conversations”. White (1995:85) also warns that re-traumatisation is not acceptable within a therapeutic context: “Distress yes, re-traumatisation, no.” Holding this awareness meant creating space for “checking” with the participants how they were in terms of the conversation taking place, and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own level of comfort, distress, emotion.

Participatory consciousness made me aware of not wanting to gain new knowledge at the expense of the participants. McTaggart (1997:4) warns against the “exploitation of people in the realization of the plans of others”. I found it useful to live with the question “Who benefits?” (Kotzé, Myburg & Roux 2002:18) as it foregrounded the commitment to a participatory action research process that would ultimately be primarily of benefit to the participants. When I asked one of the participants (Darron) about his motivation for volunteering for the study, he said that he would like others to benefit from the study, and that if his participation helped me to help others confronting infidelity and divorce it would be worthwhile.

Kotzé and Kotzé s (2001:7) words informed my position:

A commitment to do pastoral care as **participatory ethical care** immediately challenges us not to care *for* but to care *with* people who are in need of care (emphasis mine).

As architect of the therapeutic gatherings I wanted to facilitate the creation of an atmosphere of curiosity, openness and respect (Griffith cited in Freedman & Combs 1996:272) where mutual care and “caring solidarity” would make its presence felt (Sevenhuijsen 1998:147). Interpersonal care and ethics, negotiated by all participants, is reflective of Walker’s (1998:7) idea of an “expressive-collaborative” model. It was my hope that the pastoral therapeutic gatherings would bring people together in community and collaboration and would open opportunity for alternative social practices.

The third ethical consideration was katharsis. I was acutely aware that I, too, would be changed as we journeyed together and that we would all find ourselves transported to places and into territories of life and identity that we could not have imagined. White (1995:7) confirms:

Therapeutic interaction is a two-way phenomenon. We get together with people for a period of time over a range of issues, and all of our lives are changed for this.

White (1999:73-74) clarifies katharsis in its classical sense as:

...people being moved in the sense of being transported to another place, where they could not have otherwise been, as a result of witnessing a performance of life that is ‘gripping’ of them.

In the above quote White is not referring to the contemporary psychological understanding of catharsis (retelling of the traumatic event with a view to “discharge and release”, but which can result in re-traumatisation), but to katharsis in its classical sense: katharsis as associated with one’s response to the performance of Greek tragedy. In this context katharsis is understood to be a response to “witnessing powerful expressions of life’s drama” (White 2002a:14) and a way of making meaning out of our own responses. This understanding of katharsis invited me to be vigilant and reflexive throughout the research journey, and to honour the ethical commitment to acknowledge “transport” through “taking-it-back practices”. At the end of my individual meeting with Darron he said: “Telling the story shows me how far I have come.”

### **1.7.2 Researcher posture: dialogical, decentred, not-knowing, transparent, accountable, reflexive**

Curiosity and desire for professional development invited me into research. The position I assumed as researcher is not dissimilar to the position and attitude a narrative pastoral therapist assumes. When a therapist adopts a dialogical posture, a therapeutic conversation takes place. Therapeutic conversations and therapeutic gatherings are an “in there” together process, where people talk with one another and not “to” one another (Anderson & Goolishian 1992). Together the researcher/therapist and participants co-research and co-create new meanings, new realities, new options and possibilities, new identities. My preferred position is one of ethical curiosity (Batha 2006:63). Asking questions in a tentative, curious and respectful way opened space for new meanings to emerge. Sometimes I would ask questions about the questions: “Is this what you want to be talking about?” or “May I ask you ...? Is it okay if we talk about ....?” Sometimes I would check: “How is this conversation going for you?” or “Can you let me know if this conversation becomes uncomfortable for you?”

It was important to me to remain in a dialogical, decentred, but influential and “not-knowing” position. I saw all the participants as experts in their own lives, with their own local knowledges (lived experience). The “not-knowing” position invited me into a participatory mode of consciousness. Heshusius (1994:17) explains that a participatory mode of consciousness “results from the ability to let go of all preoccupation with self and move into a state of complete attention”.

I was especially aware that I had not experienced divorce as a spouse, and that I was in no way an expert. My expertise/influence lay in being an “architect of the dialogical process ... the therapist is a participant-observer and a participant-facilitator of the therapeutic conversation” (Heshusius 1994:27).

The ethics of accountability and transparency (a term attributed to David Epston by White, 1991) invited me to be open and honest with the group regarding my cultural and social context, and to acknowledge the power afforded by my position of researcher (Doehring 1999:102). I remembered McTaggart’s (1997:33) invitation to confront the subtlety of power attached to my “academic role”. As the group consisted of a gender, language, religious and cultural mix I held

an awareness of the limitations of my own local knowledge. As I am not a *tabula rasa* I was aware of my influence in selecting, interpreting and analyzing data. I was also open to the group asking me questions, aware that the concept of reflexivity incorporates autobiography, for as Ruby (1982:4) puts it:

To be reflexive [in reporting] is to be not only self-aware, but to be sufficiently self-aware to know what aspects of self are necessary to reveal so that an audience is able to understand both the process employed and the resultant product and to know that the revelation itself is purposive, intentional and not merely narcissistic or accidentally revealing.

My ethical responsibility and commitment was to engage in reflexive research practice and to report reflexively in the final product (Hall in Zuber-Skerritt 1996).

## **1.8 THE RESEARCH JOURNEY CONTINUES**

Chapter Two introduces the key concepts and an introduction and exploration of some of the wealth of literature available in the divorce recovery field.

Chapter Three tells of the pastoral therapeutic gatherings, and introduces the narratives of the participants, with a focus on the effects of infidelity and divorce on the faithful spouses' identities, using the rite-of-passage and journey metaphors.

Chapter Four pays attention to the second aim, providing an exploration of the effects of witnessing the stories of infidelity and divorce in a group of faithful spouses.

In Chapter Five, I reflect on what I have learned during and from this research journey. I discuss what I have learned about the doing of research and I summarise my reflections and learnings in exploring a narrative approach to the renegotiating of identity post infidelity and divorce. I reflect on how it has opened up new "ways of being" (Reinharz 1992:211) for me as a pastoral therapist working in the field of marriage, infidelity and divorce. It has been a rich journey for which I am indebted to my co-travellers. The final chapter also includes the voices of Darron, Robert, Joan, Emma and Abigail expressing what this research journey has meant to them.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **RENEGOTIATING IDENTITY: RE-AUTHORING NARRATIVES POST INFIDELITY AND DIVORCE**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter offers an exploration and discussion of the key concepts of this dissertation, and a description of my discursive position during the research journey. A veritable plethora of literature abounds in the divorce recovery field. My initial readings stimulated my curiosity and I have read widely. However, the limited scope of this dissertation led me to focus on areas relevant to this research project, and for the purposes of this literature review I offer a brief overview of definitions and statistics regarding divorce and infidelity, and then a more focused look at divorce recovery, specifically infidelity and divorce recovery. I have been guided by social construction discourse, post-structuralism and post-modern theological discourse, contextual practical theology, the feminist theology of praxis and narrative pastoral therapy. My reading, reflecting and writing have been informed by my desire to provide pastoral therapeutic care to those searching for recovery in the light of infidelity and divorce.

#### **2.2 OVERVIEW OF KEY CONCEPTS**

Gergen and Gergen (1991:78) emphasise that language is performative in a social context, in the sense that as people speak with others they mutually co-ordinate, negotiate, and shape their values and meanings, consequent choices and behaviour. Dominant cultural ideologies often define understanding and meaning making (Freeman & Lobovits 1993:188). In the following section I therefore clarify the meanings, as applicable to this dissertation, of the concepts of divorce, infidelity and divorce-recovery.

##### **2.2.1 Divorce**

Divorce is defined in the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1993:715) as:

Legal dissolution of marriage by a court or other competent body, or according to recognized forms; a decree dissolving a marriage.

Statistics SA (2002:viii) defines divorce as “the conclusive act of dissolution of a marriage”. In both definitions it is interesting to note that divorce is defined within the context of marriage: without marriage there would be no divorce. Clinebell (1984:256) speaks of marriage as the vehicle for “the creation of a new psychological entity – *their relationship*”. This new entity is called “the identity of the marital pair” by family therapy pioneer Nathan A. Ackerman (1958:22). Weiss, in Blomquist (1986:161), refers to the words of Jesus in Mark 10:6-12:

A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.... Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she marries another man, she commits adultery.

Although one often hears the phrase “marriage is an out-dated institution”, research shows stability in the marriage rate and no evidence has been produced to show a decline. More than 90% of American eighteen year olds say that they expect to marry (Baron & Byrne 1994:330). These expectations appear to be accurate in that 90% of the US population is, or has been married by the age of 50 (Thornton & Freedman 1982:298). In the USA, marriage rates for males and females have remained relatively stable since 1966 (Botha 1998:16). However, Worthington, Shortz and Mc Cullough (1993) postulate that marriage is becoming increasingly important in the organization of society.

In 2002 the median age of first registered marriages in South Africa was 29 years for females and 33 years for males (this includes officially recorded marriages for all population groups). In South Africa 75 528 officially recorded marriages took place in 1982, 111 557 in 1992 and 177 202 in 2002. These increases may be due to the inclusion of previously excluded groups in the recording of South African statistics. The above statistics are from STATS SA REPORT NO. 03-07-01 (2002) taken from Census 2001. In a more recent survey AMPS 2005RA found that “around 230,000 South Africans get married every year: 16% are below the age of 25 and 8% are older than 50”.

The incidence of divorce, as reported earlier, is increasing. This increase is not only a South African trend, it is an international phenomenon. AMPS 2005RA report that 55% of South

Africans aged 25 or more are married or living together, 4% are divorced or separated and 10% are widowed. Worthington (1988:17) and Efird (1985:11) confirm that more and more marriages end in divorce. Statistics show that the rate of divorce in the US has risen dramatically from 5% of first marriages in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 33% of marriages in the 1970's and early 80's, to an estimated 50% of first marriages initiated in recent years (Chadwick & Heaton 1992:1-2, 53-55). It is predicted that the rate will continue to rise (Donovan & Jackson 1990:23). Glick (1983:103) states quite simply: "About 2,4 million couples marry each year; during the same time period, another 1,2 million are divorced, most often during the second to sixth years of marriage." Most divorced individuals do remarry, especially males (Baron & Byrne 1994:344). In the US, over two million people have been married three or more times, and that number is rapidly rising (Brody, Neubaum & Forehand 1988:213). Niehaus (2001:1) confirms the paradox as she writes of the "competing dominant discourses ... the discourse of coupledness and the discourse of divorce".

The definition of divorce as "a legal dissolution of a marriage" is a "thin conclusion" (Morgan 2000:15). Robert Weiss extrapolates this definition, offering a thicker, fuller description. Weiss, cited by Blomquist (1986:161), speaks of the bonding or attachment inherent in the marital relationship when "two become one" which is broken: "It is the sociological bond, deepened by the spiritual bond, promise, or vow of commitment, which is fractured with divorce."

Divorce therefore includes the breaking of many bonds, some of which are not as patently overt as the marital bond: legal, social, familial, physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual ties may also be severed. Describing her own experience Fonda (2005:215) writes: "Marriages end in stages, and it has nothing to do with a piece of paper."

### **2.2.2 Infidelity, adultery, unfaithfulness and extra-marital affairs**

Within a Christian interpretation God's intention for marriage is viewed as monogamy and permanence. Sexuality between spouses can be enjoyed within the context of commitment and faithfulness. However, adultery has been with us in all cultures and every century (Kosovich 1978) even though it is prohibited by one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:14). Martin (1989:5) states that "[as] long as there has been sexual desire there has been infidelity".



Hunt (1969:25) and Lawson (1990:37) concur that a universal definition or an exact and objective description of adultery is elusive. Lawson (1990:37) reports that 40% of her research participants considered their extra-marital relationships as adultery, even though sexual intercourse had not taken place. Martin (1989:6) writes: “Sexual infidelity is a breaking of the emotional, spiritual and physical bond between a couple.” Infidelity is defined in The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1993:1361) as: “Unfaithfulness or disloyalty to a friend, superior, etc. Now *esp.* lack of sexual faithfulness to a partner. *Fides* = *faith*, *Infidelis*= *unfaithful*.” Botha (1998:31), naming marital unfaithfulness “an affair”, offers the following clarification after an extensive reading of related literature:

An affair, in terms of various articles, may therefore lie on a continuum between two extreme poles, the one extreme being sexual intercourse and the other a platonic friendship which intimidates the excluded marriage partner (Brown 1991, Hunt 1969, Kaslow 1993, Lawson 1990, Moulthrop 1990, Pitman 1990, Thompson 1983, 1984).

Fonda (2005:216) warns: “I discovered that you have to watch out for extramarital romances ... the relationship can take on an unwarranted and intense place in your lonely heart simply because of its juxtaposition to your marriage.” For the purposes of this research project my initial definition of infidelity was “physical unfaithfulness”. I later realized that even this description, in the light of the Clinton/Lewinsky affair, is not explicit enough. Bearing Botha’s earlier quote in mind, in which he summarizes the various interpretations of an affair as lying on a continuum between sexual intercourse and a platonic relationship, and Fonda’s warning regarding the possible trajectory of extramarital relationships, my definition of unfaithfulness falls as an outlier on Botha’s continuum. Infidelity, within the context of this research project, is defined as *sexual intercourse with a person other than one’s spouse*.

### **2.2.3 Divorce recovery**

Given such high divorce statistics, the caring professions are confronted with the challenging concept of divorce recovery. In this regard Hagemeyer (1986:237) writes the following:

As more and more pastors, counsellors and lay leaders are confronted with the need to respond to divorce within their circle of responsibility, it becomes more important to understand the process of divorce recovery.

As an active participant in this caring profession, guided by the “cura animarum” or care of souls (as pastoral care was designated in the past), I find myself asking: “What is divorce recovery?” Researchers have offered numerous theoretical models to describe the process of divorce recovery. Hagemeyer (1986:238), referring to the work of Salts, identifies two main streams within divorce recovery: those focusing on the emotional/affective dimensions of the process and those focusing on behaviour/event dimensions. In the first stream Kubler-Ross’s five stages of grief (1969) (or similar descriptions with slight variations) are applied to the divorce recovery process (Herrman 1974; Wiseman 1975, Kraus 1979). The newly divorced person is seen to be migrating through the stages of (1) shock and denial, (2) anger or guilt (a time of fixing blame), (3) anxious bargaining to salvage some of what is being lost, (4) depression and resignation and finally (5) acceptance and renewal. Florence Kaslow (1995:271-283) describes seven stages of the divorce process: the emotional divorce, the legal divorce, the economic divorce, co-parental divorce and the problems of custody, community divorce, religious divorce and psychic divorce.

Klackers (1990) offers a popular divorce recovery programme, based on Kubler-Ross’s stages, from a Christian perspective and in South Africa: *Divorce Restoration: Piecing Together Your Broken Self*. Another programme in this genre is DivorceCare, a 13 week programme developed in Wake Forest, North Carolina, and offered by many local churches in South Africa. Some of the topics covered are “facing your anger”, “facing your depression” and “facing your loneliness.” Video inputs are presented by “experts on divorce and recovery” (Grissom 1996:13) and the “foundation for healing” is viewed as dependent on “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ .... In fact you will hear it said that you cannot fully heal from divorce without the power of Christ in your life.”

The second stream tends to analyse the process from an event/behaviour perspective. Bohannon (1970) offers “six stations of divorce” (emotional, legal, economic, co parental, community and psychic); Kessler (1975) offers seven stages as tasks to be performed, and Waller (1951) as well as Kressel and Deutsch (1977) offer similar models. All of these are problematic in that people do not experience the stages or events in a sequential, linear progression, but rather as circular or cyclical patterns, varying in intensity and duration, with stages being repeated, skipped or occurring simultaneously (Hagemeyer 1986:239). Hagemeyer (1986:239) writes of “a simpler interlocking dynamic between the two types of models” and he postulates that the emotional

stages of the first stream may be seen as responses to the actual or threatened losses of the second stream, as they are occurring.

All of the courses mentioned above offer a pre-packaged “workshop”, and none of them focus on the specific wounding caused by sexual infidelity, or the recovery of identity post unfaithfulness. Rossouw (1993:901) warns against dishing out “pre-cooked solutions” and instead demands that clergy and other communicators in the church “step down from a dominating position and become fellow players in the search for a meaningful Christian life in our contemporary culture”. Skidmore (2002:34), a pastoral therapist, offering a narrative approach and a more practical exposition, writes:

The role of helping people to recover from divorce is to assist in exposing those dominant societal discourses, subjugating other alternative knowledges, and to help in the search for a multiplicity of understandings, which help them to live life to its fullest extent.

After reading all of the above, I asked myself again, what constitutes divorce recovery? For me, a divorce recovery pastoral programme involves offering people an opportunity to redefine their identities in more positive terms, encourages an enlarged sense of the possibilities of life and precipitates movement towards effecting the empowering changes they discover they wish to make. I was curious as to the efficacy of a narrative approach to divorce recovery as it appears to offer opportunities to open possibilities previously unexplored in current divorce recovery programmes being offered in Cape Town. Morgan (2000:15) elucidates:

To be freed from the influence of problematic stories, it is not enough to simply re-author an alternative story. Narrative therapists are interested in finding ways in which these alternative stories can be ‘richly described’. The opposite of a ‘thin conclusion’ is understood by narrative therapists to be a ‘rich description’ of lives and relationships.

#### **2.2.4 Infidelity and divorce recovery**

“Extra-marital affairs are the main reason for divorce in western society,” writes Botha (1998:13), corroborating Pittman’s findings (1993:35):

In 30 odd years of practice, I have encountered only a handful of established first marriages that ended in divorce without someone being unfaithful, often with the

infidelity kept secret throughout the divorce process and even for years afterwards. Infidelity is the *sine qua non* of divorce.

However, when I requested a theological database search for literature on “divorce recovery in the face of infidelity” I received the following response from the Unisa librarian:

Attached is a file just on infidelity. As soon as I link it with divorce recovery I get 0 results.

If extra-marital affairs are indeed the main reason for divorce in western society I wonder why there appears to be a lack of research in the infidelity and divorce recovery field? I wonder if pastoral care in the face of infidelity in the modern world involves counselling the unfaithful spouse back into fidelity and the marriage. My recent experience with Graham informs this question. Graham is married, has had a Catholic upbringing, is currently a member of a charismatic evangelical church and has been involved in an extra-marital relationship for five years. He and his wife have sought counselling and pastoral care from numerous Christian psychologists and ministers of religion. In each instance Graham has been told to terminate the extra-marital relationship and to commit to “getting the marriage back on track”. This option, mandated to Graham, is delivered as the “only right thing to do”. Hare-Mustin (1994:20) explains: “The efforts of most therapists [and clergy] represent the interests and moral standards of the dominant groups in society ... an examination of the goals of most family therapies (for example, maintain the family, avoid divorce) ... reveals that we as therapists are engaged in social control more than social change.” Anderson (1997:31) extrapolates:

The modernist discourse perpetuates the notion of discoverable, universal metaphors for human description – monovocal and unilaterally determined fixed truths about universal human nature and individual human behaviour.

From this modernist perspective psychotherapy is a technology, the psychotherapist is the technician and the person seeking therapy is viewed as a “faulty human machine” (Anderson 1997:33). Within this perspective of marital counselling the marital relationship could be viewed as the “faulty machine that needs to be fixed”, or the infidel could be seen as the one who is faulty, and needs to be fixed. Botha (1998:13) comments:

Pastoral therapists usually operate within a modernistic theology and use their ‘expert’ knowledge of theological ethics to confront the unfaithful spouse – a pastoral therapeutic approach that neither delivers the desired results, nor honours the client’s expertise and freedom.

An oft quoted text, not quoted in its full context, is Malachi 2:16: “I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel...” Christian married couples seeking counselling in the face of difficulty, often hold central the vows they made, with God as witness, to stay together “till death us do part”. As I reflect on the question I asked above, and on Botha’s quote, and the position held by many Christian couples, I realise that many pastoral therapists, operating from a modernistic position, situated within the reformed, confessional, kerygmatic approaches, would use Scripture to counsel couples to “fix” the problem and stay married. Clinebell (1984:259), a proponent of the holistic-growth approach, states that “the overall goal of marriage crisis counselling and also marriage therapy is to help couples learn how to make their relationship more mutually need-satisfying and therefore more growth-nurturing”. Other pastoral therapists may take a different position. Marie-Henry Keane (1998:1210) clarifies:

Christian Theology is manifestly pluralistic both in its approach and content. Different theologians have different sets of priorities; they find themselves in different situations; they come from different cultures; and are formed by different religious traditions.

Libraries abound with journal articles and books on divorce, divorce recovery and on infidelity. A search of the SOCIOFILE database revealed 9 282 articles published (and dissertations completed) between 1990 and 1999 in which “divorce” appeared in the title or abstract (Amato 2000:1270). There appears, however, to be very little research which focuses specifically on divorce recovery in the face of infidelity, and I was not able to uncover any research on a narrative pastoral approach to divorce recovery in the light of infidelity. Botha (1998:30) comments: “There is a lack of research in *pastoral counselling or pastoral therapy* with regard to marital problems. The lack of research in respect of problems related to extra-marital affairs is even more profound.” Even in Clinebell’s book, specifically in the chapter entitled “Marriage Enrichment and Marriage Crisis Counselling” I was surprised to find no mention whatsoever of infidelity. How can such a widespread phenomenon receive so little exposure in the literature on pastoral counselling? Is it because Christians avoid talking about sex?

Botha (1998) wrote a doctoral thesis entitled *Pastoral Therapy and Extra-marital Affairs: A Narrative Approach* and Skidmore (2002) completed a Masters dissertation, entitled *Re-authoring Narratives in a Divorce Recovery Ministry*. Neither of them touched on divorce recovery in the wake of infidelity. Botha (1998:30) comments on the lack of research in pastoral counselling or pastoral therapy with regard to marital problems and highlights the lack of

research related to extra-marital affairs. Worthington et al (1993:13) recommend increased research on pastoral counselling that focuses on marital counselling. In my own experience, whilst looking for further training for myself in the area of couple counselling, I attended (along with a number of ordained clergy) a “Couple Counselling Training Course” at FAMSA Western Cape. This course was not simply restricted to couple counselling with a view to getting the marriage back on track; it also dealt with strategies and skills should the couple opt for separation and divorce. In the training session on “Affairs/Infidelity” it was acknowledged that “working with infidelity is one of the most difficult areas of marital work” and “when partners can be helped through what can be a rite-of-passage, to engage with each other in the ordinary love of marriage, or to face the inevitability of the end of the marriage relationship, much has been achieved” (FAMSA SA 2004).

## **2.3 THE POLITICS OF INFIDELITY AND DIVORCE THROUGH THE THERAPEUTIC LENS OF A POSTMODERN NARRATIVE APPROACH**

People speak about “the divorce-disease”. This phrase has highlighted my awareness of the severe consequences inflicted on an individual’s life and self-narrative by infidelity and divorce. This section examines the impact of cultural and religious discourses on identity construction whilst navigating the territory of infidelity and divorce (introducing the concepts of the journey, rite-of-passage and pilgrimage metaphors as a “compass” guiding the navigation) and also explores an interest in the healing aspect of relational space as a context for the re-authoring of identity.

### **2.3.1 Divorce as a rite-of-passage**

Blomquist (1986:161) refers to divorce as an experience of death – the death of the marital relationship and death of intimacy: “It is the experience of an even deeper kind of death or series of deaths ... it is a time of discovering the depths of one’s own woundedness, specifically with regard to the relationship which has ended.” Hope, however, re-enters when Blomquist (1986:161), referring specifically to divorce, writes of “the stages of death-gestation-rebirth”.

Michael White (2002a:15) offers an anthropological metaphor, when he writes of the usefulness of both the journey and the rite-of-passage metaphors: “The rites of passage I am referring to are

those that facilitate transitions in life, and are composed of three phases: the ‘separation’ phase, the ‘liminal or betwixt and between’ phase, and the ‘re-incorporation phase’.” Payne (2000:110) explains the usefulness of the rite-of-passage metaphor for the therapeutic journey, going so far as to state “[it] might be used to describe narrative therapy”. Gerkin (1986:19) affirms the importance of the concept of pilgrimage within the Judeo-Christian tradition and links it to a psychological and hermeneutical way of thinking about the self. In my own experience with people navigating the landscapes (both of action and consciousness) post infidelity, through divorce and beyond, I have found these concepts (journey, rite-of-passage, pilgrimage) to be valuable guiding metaphors. During the “separation” phase a person detaches not only from the marriage, but from their previous, dominant perceptions of personal history, situation and identity. During the “liminal” or transition stage the sense of confusion brought about by the first stage is accompanied by an awareness of new possibilities. During the third stage of “re-incorporation” the person’s rediscoveries and new knowledges and skills are authenticated and reinforced by being communicated to significant others and by hearing their responses.

The journey metaphor was exemplified in the experience of Margaret who came to see me in 2003. Her husband had been voluntarily admitted to Crescent Clinic as he was struggling with anxiety and felt he couldn’t cope. He came out of the clinic and moved out of their home. He denied that there was any one else in his life, but he was not prepared to join Margaret for counselling. After a period of a few months Margaret discovered that he was indeed involved with a mutual friend, as she had suspected. A few months later they divorced. Margaret slowly began to rebuild her life: she started attending church again, found companionship in her Ladies Group and worked on her golf handicap. We brought our face-to-face conversations to a close but remained in intermittent email contact. In August 2005 Margaret wrote:

I am doing so much better.... Life has its ups and downs as expected but I cope with them better each time... I am working on the issues I need to work on, which is hard at times and am amazed at how insecure I am in areas that I used to be so confident and self-assured, but I have found me again and that is great.

I was struck by the phrase “I have found me again” and recalled that the trauma of role transition in the divorce process can leave people, especially women, feeling like “non people” (Lund 1990:61). In Margaret’s words I heard resonance with the rite-of-passage metaphor, and celebrated with her a sense of re-incorporation in relation to her identity.

Meryl came to see me in 2005. She and her husband, together, saw a psychologist. Meryl's husband was involved in a relationship with a woman at work and Meryl demanded that he move out of the family home. Soon after he moved out he quit the marriage therapy. By December of 2005 Meryl was divorced. In January, after a sea-side holiday with her children, Meryl sent me an email:

To my surprise the nightmare seems to be (mostly) over. Although I get quite a bit of criticism from my family for being both divorced and on anti-depressants (no Christian should sink so low!) it is actually not that bad to have both in my life.

The above narratives echo again and again as I sit in my counselling room, in consultation with men and women facing infidelity and divorce. Infidelity and divorce appear to have many effects on the faithful spouse: feelings of self-blame, self-doubt, failure, not-good-enough, diminished worth, hopelessness, betrayal, invisibility and loss-of-identity invade the room and make their presence felt. These effects tend to become all inclusive and the faithful spouses internalise these effects. Consequently faithful spouses experience their sense of self and identity as essentially being not good-enough, being a failure and so forth. Fonda (2005: 211) shares her thoughts:

The idea of leaving him was still too hard to confront. I still felt that it was my relationship with him, however painful, that validated me. What will I be without him? I had put so much into creating a life with him, fitting into *his* life, that I'd left myself behind. But who *was* "myself"? I wasn't sure. In addition to everything else, a divorce felt like such an admission of – yes – failure.

Botha (1998:383) writes about the effects of infidelity and divorce on the faithful spouses' sense of self (identity): "Most faithful spouses experience the breach of trust as devastating. They feel worthless, rejected and blame themselves for the unfaithfulness of the unfaithful spouse and are prone to depression." These thoughts are echoed by Tomm (2002:65): "In general, whenever a person has been hurt, there is a sense of their worth being diminished as a result of the injury." However, these experiences of worthlessness and not being good enough are often supported by dominant cultural and religious discourses that inform our perceptions about divorce and infidelity.



### **2.3.2 Examining and deconstructing cultural and religious discourses when negotiating divorce and infidelity**

In modernist traditional perspectives people are seen as affected by others, or as impacted by negative life experiences, but the “wounding” or “damage” is personalized and internalized. In the face of infidelity this often leaves a divorced person seeing themselves as a failure, damaged goods, not good enough. Because traditional therapies focus on the individual, the “... ‘social location’ of the person and the issues she brings to counselling are missing” (Payne 2000:34, 35). Gass and Nichols (1988:4) state that when the fact of an affair becomes known, “it often sends the wife into an examination of what she ‘did wrong’.” Gass and Nichols (1988:4) attribute this phenomenon to socio-cultural factors (for example: sexism, patriarchy, hegemonic masculine discourses and religious structures) that more often place the woman rather than the man at a disadvantage when extramarital affairs affect the marriage. These include not only the ways in which women are socialized but also the stereotypes they encounter in society and with therapists and pastoral counsellors (Gass & Nichols 1988, citing Caplan 1984, Gilligan 1982 & Hare-Mustin 1983).

Pastoral care is exercised in a social and moral context, and therefore promotes certain values and aims and discourages others. Waldegrave (1990:5) re-iterates: “A ‘Just Therapy’ is one that takes into account the gender, social and economic context of the persons seeking help.” A narrative pastoral therapeutic approach aspires to become a “just therapy” as it takes into account the gender, cultural, social and economic discourses circulating in society. Freeman and Lobovits (1993:190) state: “Therapy is inescapably a moral endeavour.” Brueggemann (1993:9) makes a plea for viewing the practice of Christian interpretation as contextual, local and pluralistic. Pastoral care is traditionally focused on healing, guiding, sustaining, reconciling and nurturing. In stressing its multi-faceted nature Pattison (1994: 67) emphasises that “the social and political realm of existence should be of primary concern in pastoral care.... Pastoral care should be aware of structures of injustice”. Pattison’s words invite me to consider the ways in which my own pastoral practice constitutes a way of not seeing, as well as a way of seeing, which fits into the wider social order, challenging or affirming structures of injustice. I am invited to be aware of my own context and the way it informs my values, and also to be aware of the context of the person consulting with me, and to proceed with an attitude of consideration, exploration and discovery, rather than conformity (Pattison 1993:51).

From a postmodern, social constructionist position, the socio-cultural, contextual factors are highlighted by focusing on discourses about infidelity, divorce and the faithful spouse that abound in a given context. Collins (cited in Lowe 1991:44) writes of postmodern experience as being “discourse-sensitive”. A narrative approach to pastoral therapy, as informed by a postmodern discourse, embodies an assumption that cultural, social and political factors (interpersonal, local and global) affect lives, and that people often ascribe the distressing and unjust results of these social factors to themselves, as personal failures, shortcomings or faults, and that they are implicitly encouraged to do so by those who hold power (Payne 2000:21). Social and cultural influences include the taken for granted assumptions and values of the groups we belong to and the wider society in which we live. In an online report, VSO, an international service organisation active in South Africa, states: “The inequality of women in South Africa continues to be a major contributor to the HIV and AIDS pandemic ... infidelity is a cultural norm.” People living with the effects of infidelity and divorce often see themselves through a perceptual “lens”, coloured by the dominant discourses (norms and assumptions) of the society and community in which they are living. The notion of “discourse” is a central concept in Foucault’s work and a preliminary understanding of it is a “specific pattern or way of thought” (Flaskas & Humphreys 1993:39). In some ways discourse parallels Bateson’s (1972: 510) concept of epistemology: “what we know (or think we know)”. However, Foucault uses discourse more specifically than Bateson (for example, changing discourses around sexuality as in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, 1981). For Foucault discourses are created through social practices, whereas Bateson does not place much emphasis on social or historical context.

Hare-Mustin (1994:19) defines discourse as “a system of statements, practices and institutional structures that share common values”. Discourses, often so deeply imbedded in societal relations that they are rendered invisible, exert enormous influence and power and often recruit people into views about themselves. Dominant discourses reflect and are part of the prevailing ideology; they do not simply describe the social world, they also categorise it. And by so doing discourses bring certain phenomena into sight and obscure other phenomena. Many discourses intersect and interact to create cultural narratives. Discourses thus constitute knowledge and confer power (Lowe 1991:45). Hare-Mustin (1994:20) states that discourses “are part of the identity of most members of any society, and they influence attitudes and behaviours.” Multiple gender discourses co-exist, defining what is expected of men and women in relation to each other. Cultural

feminists claim that identities are shaped and constituted in discourse rather than anatomy. Prevalent discourses influencing women's and men's conception of self in Western culture include patriarchy, capitalism and religion. Gender relations and accompanying sex-role theory constitute individuals' masculine and feminine identities. Fonda (2005:153) describes her personal experience:

During the years with Vadim it never crossed my mind to ask him to help with household chores. I saw it as women's work.... This acquiescence was, in part, due to the way we were all conditioned, and partly because I felt that being the perfect, unselfish housewife would make it impossible for him to leave me...

Hare-Mustin (1994:24) names three discourses (the male sexual drive discourse, the permissive discourse and the marriage-between-equals discourse) and states: "In each case, the dominant discourse favours masculine interests and needs." Inherent in "the male sex drive discourse" is the belief that a man is owed sexual rights by his marriage contract, and that a man's sex drive is urgent and needs to be satisfied. This discourse makes the wife responsible for the moral and sexual conduct of her husband and often leaves a faithful spouse feeling that the infidelity is her fault. Contrary to this position, on being confronted with her husband's betrayal, Clinton (2003:470) does not default to blaming herself, she does not succumb to negative identity conclusions about herself, instead she cuts through to the core of the matter:

I believe what my husband did was morally wrong. So was lying to me and misleading the American people about it.... Although I was heartbroken and disappointed with Bill, my long hours alone made me admit to myself that I loved him. What I still didn't know was whether our marriage could or should last.

"The permissive discourse" appears to challenge monogamy, giving both sexes the right to freely express their sexuality. In tandem with the male sex drive discourse a reluctant woman is often labelled "uptight" or "frigid", and may then be made to feel she has no right to be hurt or betrayed by male infidelity. Hare-Mustin (1994:27) explains: "The permissive discourse justifies men's sexual freedom while punishing women who object to it by denying the validity of their objections." This discourse also allows different consequences for men and women: a husband's infidelity may be better tolerated whereas an unfaithful wife may be regarded as "devious and irresponsible" (Hare-Mustin 1994:28). In her autobiography Morgan (2001: 23) describes how she "bought into every sexual myth the guys could fling at me ... I never questioned whose needs and self-interest these models served".

“The marriage-between-equals discourse” conceals women’s subordination and men’s domination by reframing differences as equality. This discourse views love as equal to “taking care of”. Men take care through economic provision, whilst women do this through personal services and putting the other above the self. Within this discourse, a woman’s love is reflected by her self-lessness (making her partner happy at the expense of her “self”), leaving a woman uneasy if she focuses on herself, her interests and her needs (Hare-Mustin 1994:29-31).

The extract from Meryl’s email, quoted earlier (see 2.3.1), highlights two Christian (and possibly also familial) discourses: divorce and anti-depressants are not acceptable, and those succumbing to them are judged as “having sunk low”. The implications of these discourses for Meryl’s identity cannot be ignored: they could recruit her into believing that she is not a good Christian and that she is a failure as a wife and mother. Young-Eisendrath (1999:162) speculates:

If we engage with a religious or spiritual community, must we fit into traditional feminine roles to be accepted and supported? If we don’t fit into the roles, perhaps we shouldn’t be in the communities ... even more insidious is an almost palpable fear that once again we will simply have to be ‘good’ – good girls, good mothers, good wives – in order to have any part in spirituality.

A narrative approach invites us to attempt to render visible the unrecognised power of unexamined social norms and the “dominant ‘truths’ arising from ‘expert knowledges’” (Payne 2000:41). This is achieved by “deconstructing” the discourses, and specifically for the purposes of this research project, by deconstructing the discourses of infidelity and divorce which contribute to negative identity conclusions and marginalisation. Wolfreys (1998:30) argues that “... ‘deconstruction’ is a term associated (1) with the work of Jacques Derrida and (2) with a certain institutional practice of reading, involving a range of protocols which determine, once acquired, how we read, how we comment, how we interpret, and how we write on what we read”. Deconstruction is achieved by analysing the gaps, silences, ambiguities and implicit power relations within dominant discourses (Lowe 1991:43). To deconstruct is to undo, not to destroy (Shotter & Gergen 1989:7). The deconstruction of discourses assists people to separate from modes of life and thoughts that they judge to be impoverishing of their own lives and to precipitate significant changes that are empowering (White 1991:38). Deconstructing discourses which marginalise, isolate and subjugate allow persons to review their relationship with themselves and their relationship with others (White 1988:41). Included in the dominant divorce

discourses are the notions that divorced people are failures, unfaithful spouses are bad and that the faithful spouse was “not good enough.” These discourses marginalise and disenfranchise. These discourses can also radically influence identity.

### **2.3.3 Identity construction**

Social constructionism is postmodern in its perspectives and in its emphasis on the multiple, changing, complex, interactive nature of human life. Postmodernism consequently challenges the notion of an essential truth as well as an essential identity. Social constructionism emphasizes the intertwined nature of our construction of our own identity, and highlights the social and cultural processes through which we build a sense of identity, and the way these influences affect our actions, our ability to “perform”. As Freedman and Combs (1996:268) clarify: “as social constructionists, we view ‘self’ not as a core or essential or pre-ordained entity, but as something we constitute in relationship with other people.” Ackermann (2003:11) uses the words of philosopher Charles Taylor to describe identity:

It is who we are, ‘where we’re coming from’. As such it is the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense.... [M]y discovering my own identity doesn’t mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others.

Affirming the relational aspect of identity, Freedman and Combs (1996:34) state the following: “We conclude, then, that there is no such thing as an essential self. Selves are socially constructed through language and maintained in narrative.” Thus the stories that people tell about their lives and themselves are self-narratives and construct their sense of identity. Gergen (1994:186) extrapolates: “It will become increasingly clear that the narratives of the self are not fundamentally possessions of the individual but possession of relationships – products of social interchange.” For Gergen (1994:188) people “do not author their own lives”, rather a person’s identity is a relational identity. The relational identity is not fixed and static but is constantly reviewed within social interaction. The validation of self-narratives depends on the affirmation of others.

In my experience, as I listened to the self-narratives of the faithful spouses in the face of infidelity and the dissolution of the marital relationship, I heard problem-saturated stories which

encompassed many losses and changes, including the radical disturbance of identity (Rossiter 1991:149). Carey and Russell (2003b:60) confirm that “when someone comes to see a therapist it is often because terrible and/or complex circumstances have given rise to highly negative conclusions about themselves. This might include understanding themselves to be ‘a loser’ or ‘hopeless’ or ‘deserving of unhappiness’ or ‘depressed’ or ‘crazy’ or any other number of problematic identity conclusions.” I have been inspired, encouraged and challenged by the narrative approach to pastoral care, and its understanding that people give meaning to their lives through the stories they construct about their lives, and that their lives are much richer than the stories they have constructed about them.

Narrative practice is based upon the belief that our sense of self is socially constructed and exists in relationship to other people. One of the key elements of a narrative approach is the consideration of how stories shape people’s identities. White (1992:123) writes that “the narrative metaphor proposes that persons live their lives by stories – that these stories are shaping of life, and that they have real, not imagined effects – and that these stories provide the structure of life”. How an event is understood and interpreted, therefore, makes a considerable difference to the effects of the event. The narrative practice of re-authoring is based on the assumption that our identities are not single-storied and no single story can encapsulate the totality of a person’s experience. People are multi-storied. Re-authoring conversations involve the identification and co-creation of alternative storylines of identity, a process that involves moving from thin identity conclusions to richer identity conclusions. White (2001:31) refers to people’s negative identity conclusions as “the thin conclusions that people have about their own and about each other’s identity”. Payne (2000:33) clarifies the distinction “between ‘thin’ descriptions of life, which derive from a person’s unexamined socially and culturally influenced beliefs, and ‘rich’ or ‘thick’ descriptions, which more nearly correspond to the actuality and complexity of life as experienced by that person”.

This re-authoring is a collaborative process where alternative stories and preferred identity conclusions can be co-constructed through therapeutic conversations. White (2001:33) confirms that re-authoring conversations contribute to a thick (or rich) description as they invite people to “step into other experiences of their identity” (see 2.2.3). Thus re-authoring conversations are actually shaping of, or constituting of, life and identity. If a person facing infidelity and divorce says “Essentially, I am a loser”, the postmodern, social constructionist, pastoral therapist

operating within a narrative paradigm would hold an understanding that there is no essential identity and the description of self as “a loser” is a thin description. Freedman and Combs (1996:16) explain:

Narrative therapists are interested in working with people to bring forth and thicken stories that do not support or sustain problems. As people begin to inhabit and live out the alternative stories, the results are beyond solving problems. Within the new stories, people live out new self images, new possibilities for relationships and new futures.

As mentioned above, Gergen and others have postulated that the relational identity is not fixed and static but is constantly reviewed within social interaction. An awareness of the multiple effects of infidelity on the faithful spouses’ identity encouraged me to explore how pastoral therapeutic conversations could provide a space for re-authoring conversations in which a person could richly describe their preferred identity conclusions (Monk et al 1997:20). I was curious as to the efficacy of a group context in enabling a re-authoring process.

#### **2.3.4 Re-authoring identities within the relational space of a group context**

In the light of the social constructionist position that identity is constructed within relationships, this research project provided a therapeutic group context in which social interaction took place and through which a preferred identity could be renegotiated. An article, simply entitled *Gatherings*, by Sue Todd inspired this thinking. Todd (2001:70) writes:

I’m very taken by the idea of therapeutic gatherings. They seem to be a way of drawing people together around a theme that is important to their lives, a way of sharing hopes, dreams, memories and getting to know each other in ways that can often be missed ... I also like the fact that within a gathering structure it isn’t me (or a lone therapist) coming up with answers or offering advice – instead these gatherings offer the potential for a community to grow around a theme.

Michael White has written widely on the efficacy of a group context, specifically on the concept of “reflecting team work” as “definitional ceremony” (White 1991, 1995, 1997) incorporating a “focus on the role of outsider witnesses in authenticating people’s identity claims” (Carey & Russel 2003a:5). Barbara Myerhoff (1982:267) argues: “Definitional ceremonies ... provide opportunities for being seen and in one’s own terms, garnering witnesses to one’s own worth, vitality and being.” The reflecting team proposal was introduced to the family therapy field by

Tom Andersen in his 1987 article *The Reflecting Team: Dialogue and Meta-dialogue in Clinical Work*.

One of the ways in which people know who they are and have personal identity is through the memory of past events. This is confirmed by Pattison (1993:6) who wrote: “History is crucial to identity.” Lapsley (2002:72) explains the value of the pastoral therapeutic practice of creating a forum for the sharing of memories:

...creating a spiritual space where we can begin to look at our lives ... we are interested in the healing of memories through story-telling. We try to create a context in which a group of people ... can share some of the stories of their experience... we also look to that which is redemptive in the past and how this can be carried forward. We talk about certain qualities that people have demonstrated in the past, such as commitment and courage. We share stories about these and discuss how they might be carried on into the future.

It is this thinking which informed my desire to create a narrative therapeutic group context for people facing infidelity and divorce, where they could tell (“perform”) their stories, within a group of faithful spouses. Stories and self-knowledges are created by people within a context, and as stories are told and witnessed, the story is contingent on who listens with what attention and attunement. This focus can open possibilities for new stories, alternative stories and preferred identities to develop. Krog (1998:57) eloquently captures this concept:

And then there is the realization that in capturing a particular memory in words, for victim and witness alike, it can ‘no longer haunt you, push you around, bewilder you, because you have taken control of it – you can move it wherever you want to’.

A group context provides a space for this telling and “witnessing” of stories. Because of the understanding that our identities are formed in relationship with others a key aspect of a narrative approach involves “being witnessed”. Carey and Russell (2003a:15) postulate that when someone is engaging in creating alternative storylines of identity, stories that are free from the constraining effects of various problems, witnesses are a requirement: “witnesses who can powerfully acknowledge and authenticate the steps taken, the skills and knowledge this has required, the intentions and hopes involved”.



It was my hope that the telling and the witnessing would enable the participants to reconnect with their own knowledges about their abilities and strengths and that they would be able to construct alternative, preferred stories of themselves and their lives and identities. I hold the belief that as people's stories are listened to they become more in touch with their own healing ways and when they reclaim the stories they want to tell about their lives they become stronger (Wingard 2001). The group meetings are known as "pastoral therapeutic gatherings." The pastoral therapeutic gatherings provided the participants with an opportunity to "map" their journey, to reflect on the migration of identity (White 2000:28) and the development of knowledges and skills as they have participated in this "rite-of -passage" from marriage, through the effects of infidelity, to divorce and beyond.

## **2.4 SUMMARY**

In this chapter I have attempted to introduce the concepts of infidelity, divorce, divorce recovery and the rite-of-passage metaphor together with a very brief synopsis of relevant literature, including a discussion of discourse and an introduction to the concept of re-authoring identity within a relational space. According to social construction discourse, identity is socially constructed, resulting in an acknowledgement that meaning is never fixed, but is continuously constructed or reconstructed over time. Meaning is always relative to the discourse in which it is positioned. Deconstruction is one way of challenging taken for granted meanings and views of realities. Although meanings, realities and identities are socially constructed, they do have real effects. The power/knowledge positions of certain religious and cultural discourses could have an oppressive or abusive effect on people, like divorcees, who may find themselves in a more marginalized discursive position. The research curiosity of renegotiation of identity post infidelity and divorce as a form of pastoral care/divorce recovery emanated from my interactions with people navigating the territory of infidelity and divorce and from the concerns expressed above. As a practical, contextual theologian this curiosity resulted in an interest in creating space where re-authoring narratives could take place, and where the effects of infidelity and divorce on the faithful spouses' identity could be made visible and the effects of witnessing the stories of infidelity and divorce in a group of faithful spouses could be explored.

The next two chapters consist primarily of data-analysis and interpretation. Chapter Three focuses on the voices of the participants as they tell their stories of their journey through the

landscape of marriage, infidelity, separation, divorce and life thereafter. Their voices are woven together with the voices of the researcher and various authors. Chapter Four focuses on an exploration of the effects of witnessing the stories of infidelity and divorce in a group of faithful spouses.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **GATHERINGS: LISTENING TO THE NARRATIVES OF THE EFFECTS OF INFIDELITY AND DIVORCE ON THE FAITHFUL SPOUSES' IDENTITIES**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter tells the story of the pastoral therapeutic gatherings which took place during April to June 2007. Woven into the narrative of the gatherings are the stories of those who gathered, stories of infidelity and divorce, stories of courage, tenacity, patience, despair, endurance, hope, resilience, forgiveness, healing, understanding and growth. Different voices co-creating the weaving include the voices of the research participants, the voice of Dirk Kotzé, my supervisor, and the voices of various contributing authors. This weaving of voices reflects my commitment to an approach to group work in which the communal aspects of the research were emphasized and in which the common narrative of finding one's voice becomes a communal achievement. Hoffman (1998:7) refers to the idea of therapy as a "kind of collective social weaving, like the Bayeaux tapestry" where "natural assemblies of people" are called together to create "a more richly nuanced picture" of those present. It was my hope and intention to expand this concept from therapy to research and to draw on the "natural assemblies of people" or "community" as Behan (1999: 19) indicates: "This type of community assists its members in making meaning of their identity by seeing themselves and the world through multiple lenses." Behan's words were confirmed by Emma, after our closing session, when she wrote: "What has been highlighted for me has been the fact that we are constantly growing and being shaped, our perspectives changing."

#### **3.2 INTRODUCING THE PARTICIPANTS**

"Narrative therapy ... centres people as the experts in their own lives" writes Morgan (2000:2). Here are the voices of the participants, experts in their own lives, as they introduce themselves, giving voice to their hopes and desires, on the first evening:

Robert – I am feeling quite relaxed, looking forward to exploring some ideas, looking to benefit from participating in this process ... talking about my own experience and hearing about others experiences, see what the comparisons are and are there

similarities? I think there are some remaining demons I would like to exorcise; hopefully this process will help in that exorcism. I am anticipating learning, having feedback from other people, participating, so we can all grow from the experience.

Emma – I am feeling quite relaxed. I responded to the ad over a year ago, I wasn't actually divorced yet although I had been separated. I think that I had been so trying to put it all behind me and emotionally move on. I saw this as a test opportunity, a test on myself, to how I might have moved. I wanted to know, judge, test myself to see how far I had moved and speaking to you confirmed that I could do that and it was not going to be a traumatic thing. I feel okay within myself ... hope it is going to be informative and helpful.

Joan – I am anxious about being here; my anxiety I think is because I am quite a private person and this is very different. Even though I have been separated for two and a half years and am still not divorced I still have a very strong sense of loyalty, I almost feel this is like a breach in loyalty. I also think that learning from other people's experience is how you heal. I do think emotionally I am relatively healed.

Abigail – I am anxious tonight, but it's about meeting new people. I have been divorced for two years. Every time you think you are healed of every pain, things sort of come up again, and I was thinking last night it's all good now, it really is. Doing this partly for Penny, partly for myself. In our church we have a divorce workshop starting and they are asking for people that felt they had moved on and perhaps could help and I thought its two years I think I have moved on although some of it is so fresh, do you ever get over it? Do you know what I am saying? (*murmurs of assent from the group*).

Darron – I am feeling a little nervous tonight, but I think it's because I agreed to go first this evening ... to do this with total strangers is quite different. If I think back to the support structure during the time of my divorce the bulk of those very caring people hadn't been through a divorce; one or two had been through a divorce but so long ago, ten, fifteen years ago, I don't think it was fresh enough for them to really identify with the pain ... I thought it would be amazing actually to meet somebody in the same time frame because often I feel so alone in my experiences and one day I can be on top of things (feel she really did the right thing, did me a favour, I've really moved on with my life); one morning I will wake up in my bed and I will go 'I could kill her still', and I swing like this, less and less, but I'm still there and I think its so good to be able to share with one another occasionally. We are not alone here, there are other people right around us going through the same thing. And I value this opportunity.

Listening to the participants give voice to their feelings and hopes I was once again acutely aware of the need to discuss the possibility of retraumatisation, and my desire that we should collaborate in order to care "with" each other. I invited each participant to be aware of any signs of trauma, and asked them to alert me, assuring them that I would be vigilant too. During the course of the conversations I would sometimes ask permission to ask certain questions, and I gave the group carte-blanche to pass on any question they felt they would rather not answer. For

example, in the conversation with Robert I asked “May we go there?” and he replied, “Yes, we can go where you like.” If I sensed distress I followed up during the week. I offered my services as a pastoral therapist, and acknowledged that some of the group might prefer to see their own therapist. Darron took me up on this offer, coming to see me a few weeks after the group process had ended. Joan started attending the monthly mornings of reflection I facilitate at a local retreat centre. Some of the group members began to make contact with each other in between the meetings. We began to “care with” each other.

Rather than a re-living of the traumatic event, a narrative pastoral approach offers a re-viewing of the event from different perspectives. It is in the “re-authoring conversations” that we are able to spot the “sparkling moments” or “unique outcomes” that provide the vignettes necessary to begin constructing a preferred or alternative story (White & Epston 1990:74). The dominant, problem-saturated story gives way to the preferred, alternative story: a story that is generative of positive identity conclusions. White (2001:33) states that these positive identity conclusions “are not stand-alone phenomena”. These re-viewing, or re-authoring conversations, also contribute to the identification and exploration of other knowledges of life and practices of living which “enrich” or “thicken” the previously “thin” or negative identity conclusions which can be quite capturing of people’s lives, leading to a paralysis of action, a “strong sense of one’s life being held in suspense, of one’s life being frozen in time” (White 2001:31). The dreams, hopes, purposes, values and commitments that contribute to the alternative identity claims may be drawn out in reauthoring conversations. Bird (2004:140) explains:

As soon as I engage with others, using a relational and contextually orientated conversational process, I am actively contributing to the process of narrating. This process is dynamic and multi-faceted.

### **3.3 SETTING THE SCENE**

Although I was taking the role of researcher and not therapist, throughout our gatherings I remembered the words of Morgan (2000:130): “Ensuring an atmosphere of curiosity, respect and transparency is the responsibility of the therapist.” Emma spoke of the intrinsic safety felt from the beginning and later wrote: “Thank you Penny for your wise facilitating.” Darron “agree[d] that the group must be kept small. The group should also run over a period of at least six weeks. This gives the participants enough time to bond and reflect.” He added that what worked for him

“was being in an environment that is caring and trusting. The non- judgemental framework that this operated in. This enabled me to share at a very deep level with no inhibitions.” Abigail confirmed:

I found it a comfortable, safe and easy environment to share and the amount of people being limited to five helped the timing of the meeting.

Joan commented:

Initially I was a bit apprehensive, having never done counselling or any kind of workshop before, but from the first meeting I felt:

1. Relaxed and safe – as in everything was to remain confidential
2. I bonded with the group through common ground – albeit pain!
3. I really was excited to be part of an experience that has been both interesting and thought provoking.

The above comments highlight the importance of facilitation and negotiation, power sharing, care, trust, confidentiality and relationship: relationship between people and their environment, and relationship between people. From the beginning the participants engaged in respectful and collaborative practices that contributed to ethical participatory consciousness and ethical ways of being. From the focus on context we move to the telling of stories for “[h]uman beings construct life socially and communally in and through language”, as confirmed by Roux and Kotzé (2002:150).

### **3. 4. TELLING OF NARRATIVES**

It had become clear to me, both in my practice as pastoral therapist and in my initial research into existing divorce recovery programmes, that none of the workshops offered focused on recovery where infidelity had been a factor. It appeared that infidelity was unnamed, invisible, but very present in these programmes. The participants in this study who had attended divorce recovery workshops confirmed this. Sween (1998:6) writes:

A person’s life is criss-crossed by invisible story-lines. These unseen story-lines can have enormous power in shaping a person’s life. Narrative therapy involves the process of drawing out and amplifying these story-lines.

“The stories we make up, make us up”, writes O’Callahan (2001:3). In the light of this comment it became an intention to create a space where the “not yet said” (Anderson & Goolishian 1992)

could be given voice to, in a way which would allow healing and the re-authoring of narratives and identity. Epston (1998:214) confirms the efficacy of narrative work where this intention is held:

Narrative work is based on the belief that the stories we hold about our lives are mined from our relationships and experiences, both past and present, and that these stories shape our present experience and future possibilities.

Epston and White (1990:9) introduced the narrative metaphor and the re-authoring metaphor to the therapeutic field. One of the key considerations that their work introduced was to consider how stories shape people's identities. In turn this led to an exploration of what makes up a story. There are four elements that comprise the development of a story-line: events, in a sequence, across time, organized according to a plot or theme.

When we met on the first evening I introduced the group to the concept of the journey and rite-of-passage metaphors (see 2.3.1). During the six weeks we spoke often of the journey metaphor, referred to the chronological time line and carried an awareness of the "hermeneutic circle". This concept, referred to by Heidegger, is described by Anderson (1997:39): "Understanding is circular because it always involves reference to the known; the part (the local) always refers to the whole (global) and conversely the whole always refers to the part." Using the rites-of passage metaphor as a basic framework, we explored the effects of infidelity and divorce on identity within three distinct phases. As a contextual theologian I felt it important to firstly explore identity constructs within the marriage (pre-infidelity and divorce). Secondly, Whites' separation phase and liminal space became lived territory as we explored the effects on identity when infidelity and/or divorce made its presence visible. Thirdly, we explored re-authored identity post separation and divorce. This became the period of rebirth (Blomquist 1986:161) and reincorporation (White 2002a:15). We discovered that narratives of infidelity and divorce do not occur in a tidy sequence of events: both Joan and Abigail said their marriages died whilst they were still in them (see 3.4.3) and two of the group, both male, found themselves divorced before the presence of infidelity was confirmed.

### 3.4.1 Narratives of the faithful spouses' identity within marriage

Listening carefully and responding accurately to the story of another is true ministry. To be understood and accepted by another person is a treasured dimension of human living. It is also the first movement of any kind of care.

(Anderson & Foley 1998:45)

I used these words of Anderson and Foley as a template guiding the writing up of the data. There is an invitation to the reader to listen carefully to the “story of another” without interruption. The voices are followed by my reflections.

Darron – I was the carer, homemaker, nurturer, totally, I was the mom to Shannon. Gill earned three to four times my salary and that brought another dimension to the relationship. I don't know what a normal marriage is, but in terms of a South African marriage mine was very backward and the roles were very reversed. I didn't always feel that I was the man of the house – although I believe in democracy in a relationship. I always took deep pride in my ability to communicate, I always thought I had high EQ, hence my vocation in teaching and ministry. I always took great pride in my marriage and my relationship and Gillian always said she loved me for my mind and my ability to communicate – I always thought this was the key for keeping marriage successful and on the right track. I thought I had what it takes to keep it together for the rest of my life. Obviously I didn't but at that time I really thought I did. And as time went by I began to realize it wasn't that easy and things happen and perhaps I had been too idealistic.

Joan – We were married for 25 years. And I would say 20 of the 25 were great. From the minute I got married I was a fulltime wife and mother. I entertained for him constantly; I was very involved with my kids. I am a nurturer, it's what I do. My whole focus was on them. Although I wouldn't say I lost my identity – I still did things I enjoyed, I wasn't like a doormat to him but I think, when you love a person, you kind of try and be what he wants you to be. I was married to him for 25 years, and I'd been with him for nine years before that, so I'd spent 34 years of my life with him. He'd been my knight in shining armour, he was everything I had always wanted in a man, he doesn't drink, he was dependable, reliable, always there, an extremely good father. He wasn't a difficult person, but he definitely made the final decisions. That didn't worry me at that stage, it felt quite nice.

Robert – We had a happy marriage as far as I was concerned. I was very happy in the marriage ... superficially, everything was going well - the external was, you know, financial development, good house, kids at private school, and I believed – I was as happy as the pig in the proverbial. Everything was rosy in the garden. We were different in our social interactions with other people. I'm fairly sort of closed type of individual, I don't have a vast number of friends, I relate to few people, and I have friends that last for a long time, and those I concentrate on. She, on the other hand, wanted one of these homes where the doors are flung wide all the time, please come in, and I didn't like that, to be honest, that wasn't me. I'm the Englishman with my castle and if you want to come



in my castle you make the arrangements.... I am a committed person, when I commit to something, I do it. I'm not frivolous. I don't go from one pursuit to another. I never had any modicum of doubt in my mind that I would have strayed from that course in my marriage, I mean, I was absolutely, totally committed to that relationship.

Abigail – I was married at 22, to a doctor who was a houseman ... and I was just trying to be the best possible wife ... I am not a doormat ... I was trying to be the best possible wife and mother and head of department, doing all those things.... I tried to look good, and I think the stress of all this was just huge for me ... and you know, the coping thing, I have always done this. And I remember when I was quite newly married, having a stressful day, and I said 'I'm sorry, I am so stressed, everything is going wrong', and he said 'I just like it when you cope' and I said 'I'm so sorry, I'm so premenstrual and it's been a bad day' and he said 'I married you because you cope so well'. And I think I have always given that façade of being the coper, or the helper, I was on the PTA at school, you know what I mean? I've always enjoyed that sort of thing.

In the individual meeting with Emma she told me: "I was so proud of the marriage I had. I thought I was the safest woman in Cape Town." In the group Emma explained:

I knew I wasn't happy but I would never have pinned it on to him. Thinking back on it, I was thinking about it today actually, I was more unhappy than I was prepared to admit. I think I was feeling unfulfilled because I hadn't gone back to work, I thought I would, when my last child goes to school, I will go and work. I had done some relief teaching, I had been out of the market place for quite a while, been incredibly insecure, as one does when one hasn't worked for a while, and there was no real need for me to have to go and work, but, um, I suppose I was stalling. I was feeling under pressure, not so much from anybody actually, just from myself, to get back into the marketplace, but I didn't. I think it was leading to frustrations within myself, because I knew I didn't want to get back into teaching, ultimately I did, but I didn't ever want to go back into a school situation again.

In terms of the journey metaphor the narratives above are reflective of the attachment phase of the relationship as the participants' stories begin as stories of identity within marriage. As I read these narratives I am reminded of the words of Monk et al (1997:3): "From a few small pieces of information, the beginning of a story located in a particular culture is constructed." Baron and Byrne (1994:330) highlight the societal discourse of marriage as "an achievement":

Marriage [continues] to be the primary interpersonal goal of most young people. These expectations are accurate, in that most people actually do get married. By the time they reach their mid-forties or fifties, more than 90% of the population is or has been married. One of life's greatest challenges, however, is in finding happiness in this relationship and in discovering how to avoid breaking up.

Discourses, often so deeply imbedded in societal relations that they are rendered invisible, exert enormous influence and power and often recruit people into views about themselves (as

discussed in 2.2.2). According to Bird (2000:209) “[p]eople’s narratives of the past exist within a social, moral and value-laden cocoon”. Kidd (2002:1) writes of her experience of “waking up” to patriarchy and the impact on her identity:

I was going along doing everything I ‘should’ have been doing, and then unexpectedly, I woke up. I collided with the patriarchy within my culture, my church, my faith tradition, my marriage, and also within myself. And this collision changed everything. I began to wake up to a whole new way of being a woman. I took what seems to me now, an immense journey.

Discourses abound in the narratives of the participants, as do metaphors: “man of the house”, “knight in shining armour”, “Englishman with my castle”, “doormat”, “the key”. Two themes emerge from the narratives that beg exploration. The “gender role” and “happy ever after” discourses emanate from fairy tales and have a huge influence over our hopes, dreams and values.

As a little girl I remember particularly the stories of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White. In these stories, the beautiful female is rescued by a handsome prince. These fairy tales embody the discourse that helpless women are rescued by men. This discourse feeds into the gender stereotypes that women are weaker and helpless and that men are stronger, the rescuers. These discourses inform patriarchal societies where men are dominant and women are subservient. Lund (1990:61) explains:

In a traditional marriage men often assume the role of economic provider and become the family link with the legal, political and social structures of society. A woman who has been socialized to be a passive, dependent, caretaker is often at a complete loss when she loses her family roles.

Darron appears to see a typical South African marriage as patriarchal, as he admits his marriage “was very backward and the roles were very reversed”, as he was the homemaker, “mom to Shannon” and his wife earned three to four times his salary. Joan’s marital relationship appears to be traditional and patriarchal. Joan was a “fulltime wife and mother”, her husband was “my knight in shining armour” and “he definitely made the final decisions”. Joan said: “I wouldn’t say I lost my identity ... I wasn’t a doormat”. Abigail and her husband both worked, although household chores were divided along stereotypical gender roles. In Abigail’s narrative she also protests: “I am not a doormat”. No-one in the group had suggested that Abigail and Joan were doormats, in fact the word had not been mentioned, until they gave voice to it. It stands as testimony to the implicit in societal discourses, and often in Christian discourses when Ephesians

5 verse 22 is quoted out of context: “Wives, submit to your husbands”. Emma had stopped working in order to be a full time wife and mother, and over time, the delay in reincorporating the working role appears to have invited frustration into Emma’s life; her narrative expresses the intra-personal conflict she had been experiencing. Robert’s narrative, in contrast, expresses his satisfaction with his life; he appears to have been enjoying all that society would deem successful: “everything was going well, financial, good house, kids at private school”, although he does admit to differences in social style within the marital relationship.

The happily ever after discourse is also present in the narratives – as Darron argues: “I thought I had what it takes to keep it together for the rest of my life.” He also refers to communication as “the key for keeping marriage successful”. Darron, being articulate, and a good communicator, thought he had the key to “happily ever after”. Robert comments: “I was absolutely, totally committed to that relationship.” Darron says: “[I] took great pride in my marriage” and Emma speaks of “being so proud of the marriage I had”. This community of faithful spouses all spoke of marriage as a life long commitment. Further discussion of the commitment resonance is discussed in Chapter Four.

Fairytales begin with the words “once upon a time” and end with the words “they lived happily ever after.” We grow up in societies which perpetuate these myths, and we enter marriage with illusions which are soon shattered. Fowers et al (2001:95) found “the presence of illusions about a future marriage among single individuals suggests that positive marital illusions are a cultural phenomenon.” Shattered illusions often result in shattered identities. In the narratives above, there is evidence that this community of faithful spouses, whilst married, saw themselves as committed, as proud, as copers, as people who had what it takes to make a marriage successful. Individually, in terms of identity, they appear to have had a “robust sense of self” (White 2002b:12).

### **3.4.2 The faithful spouses’ identities shift in the light of infidelity and divorce**

As infidelity made its presence felt, the participants moved into the separation phase of the journey metaphor, a phase “heralded by separation from some aspect of the known and familiar, and from a specific status in life” (White 2002a:15). Narrative practice is based upon the belief that our sense of self is socially constructed and exists in relationship to other people (as

discussed in 2.2.3). As the marital relationship suffers a seismic shift, the impact of infidelity transports the faithful spouse into territories of life and identity they could never have predicted. A “radical disturbance of identity” shatters the robust sense of self enjoyed in the marriage (Rossiter 1991:149). Personal and relational identity shifts dramatically.

Both Robert’s and Darron’s stories initially reflect a sense of hopelessness, impotence, disempowerment and emasculation. Darron called himself “stupid” and Robert spoke of becoming a “nobody.” Both men felt they had lost their wives, their marriages, their homes, their children and their day to day lifestyle of waking each day with their children in their homes.

In the midst of sexual intercourse, Robert says his wife “tells me to stop, and says she can’t go on anymore and wants a divorce.” He asks: “Is there somebody else involved here?” and she says “No, definitely not.” Robert states “that was number one, first lie. I would have gone away feeling much happier, had she just come clean and we could have cleared the air.” Robert describes the effects of the infidelity and divorce on his identity:

I was shattered, I was absolutely bloody shattered. One day you are this father figure and you have this household, and you have these children and that’s your life and the next day the whole thing gets turned upside down and you in a sense become nobody.

In dealing with the impact of the lies and betrayal Robert continues:

It’s horrible when you just don’t know what’s going on with somebody you have been intimate with for 15 years – and suddenly you start discovering a new life you know nothing about. I wasn’t coping very well when I left; I really was at the lowest point. In terms of order of trauma, I had it all – I’d left my children, my home, my job, put my possessions in my car, and drove down to Cape Town to start completely again, feeling really, really sorry for myself. It was like an edifice I had built up and suddenly somebody pulled a card out from the bottom and it came collapsing down. It was very difficult to deal with. So many recriminations, in a liminal space, chaos and confusion, you’ve got to find meaning, why, why, why, what did I do wrong, and all that sort of thing. One’s male ego obviously takes a knock.

Like Robert, Darron was divorced before the infidelity was exposed. Darron however confesses:

I chose to ignore, didn’t want to hear, there was definitely estrangement. I found myself trying harder and harder, found myself doing more and more and more, kept biting my tongue, lost 20 kg, very stressed. I was tired of living under the threat of losing everything (the angst, the knot in my stomach). On the last night I said ‘I can’t do this anymore’. She said: ‘It’s over’.

When divorce was imminent Darron felt:

This is total disempowerment – and what does this say about me? For me that was the hardest thing for me, I was prepared to fight for my marriage, to fix it, maybe trying too hard? But you can't force a person to be there. It's accepting that. I was stupid. I think I tried too hard for too long to fix this and it was all on her terms. These are not my values. It was a sense of this is not me, I can't do this anymore, this is who I am, and I stand up for what I feel. I got to the point where I felt 'I want to be my own person for a while'. Those first two months – the hardest time of my life, you reach a core of your humanity, you are stripped of everything. A friend told me to breathe, that's all I did I breathed. I stopped eating. I went to the doc to get sleeping pills – I couldn't sleep – I needed to get to work every day. I went very, very numb. It was very traumatic. I reached very, very deep within myself. I did consider suicide.

In contrast to the men's narratives Abigail, Joan and Emma all became aware of the infidelity/infidelities whilst still married. Abigail explained that her husband had had numerous affairs: The first took place within a year of their marriage. At that point she said: "At age 23 you can't tell, you just cope."

Abigail – In my most intimate moments of my marriage I used to say to B, 'Am I your only one?' Five years previously my marriage died when he had an affair with his registrar that was so in my face and so embarrassing. I felt quite ashamed because I couldn't keep this man faithful to me. I understand there are two parts to a divorce, but I know I'm quite good in bed, and I was a good wife, and I really did the best I could. Divorce is two sided, but I believe its 80-20, the last five years were not easy for me, and maybe sex wasn't as good, maybe I did take my eye off the ball, and I have an incredibly stressful job, long hours, but I know I did the best I could. I can't take too much blame for it. When I discovered he was having this last affair I thought 'never again am I going to be humiliated like that'. I asked myself: 'What am I staying for? I am a capable woman, I have a lot of courage, these have been difficult, tough years and I actually don't love this man.' I am the first in our family to be divorced, its not an easy thing to be and I feel like, the word to me is associated with failure, and I hate the term divorcee. I felt very much the victim when I left B.

Joan's husband denied the affairs, and refused to go for counselling. Joan reported:

I am the kind of person – I can rant, rave, scream, shout, cry and get over it and then it can go [but] he could never confirm it, never, he told me I was speaking absolute rubbish and then it would gnaw at me and gnaw at me and bug me. So it was never resolved and I think, in a way that was the beginning of the death of our marriage, because I couldn't let it go.... And I became very suspicious, which I hated being. And I hated who I was becoming, but we carried on. So I think what happened, I withdrew. I used to write myself long letters. I felt like I was putting a wall more and more around me until I wasn't even seeing over the top anymore. It used to eat at me. The emotions I was feeling then were like anger, bitterness, sadness, all the negative things. I am lonely now living on my own; then I was more lonely with him in the house. There was a horrible tension

in the house. Instead of talking to us he would just go through the motions. He was leading a cloak and dagger kind of life – which I think was part of the excitement – and we were leading a withdrawn kind of life. By the time he actually left, he was organized, and that was typical of what made me angry too. He actually formulated his whole life, got it all sorted out. He'd got his flat and then he came home and told me he was moving. So he set up a new life, and then just walked out and left us to pick up the pieces. When he came home and said 'I'm leaving', it was actually a relief to me. I actually helped him carry furniture out to the bakkie.... I think I had already grieved my marriage when I was still in it.

I asked Joan about commitment:

I was definitely in the marriage for ever. For better or worse, I would have hung in for ever. I thought 'I am not going to be the one to cave in here'. I definitely think if we had gone for counselling we could have worked through it.

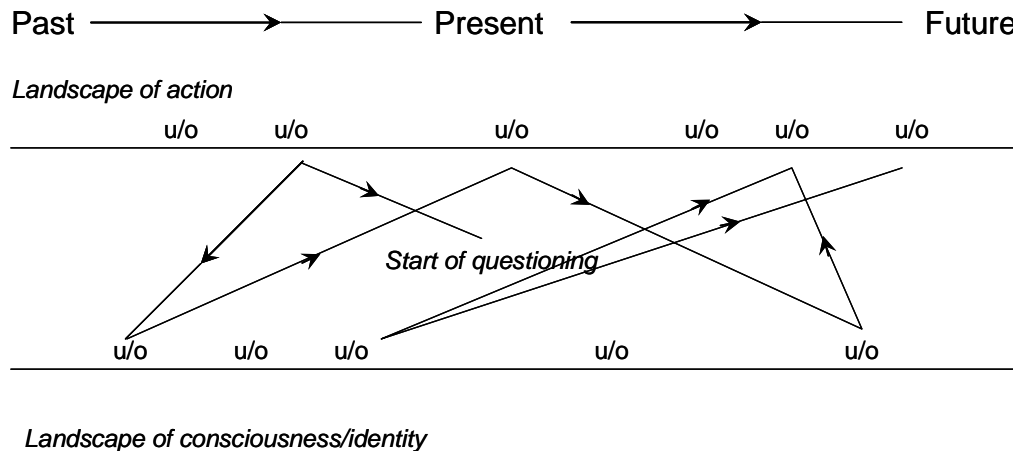
Emma had been married for 12 years when she was confronted by the infidelity:

I had absolutely no idea that my husband was having an affair and it had been going on for about three years when I became aware of it. And I was just absolutely devastated, I could not believe it, I thought I was happily married.... I've always placed a huge premium on honesty, I just can't handle deceit. So he knew how I felt and he believed that I would have that reaction 'get out and don't ever come back'. But I didn't and I surprised myself in that. My reaction was to say: 'Oh heavens, I had no idea you were so unhappy, we've got to do something to fix this, this just has to be mended because we are both bigger than divorce, and this absolutely mustn't happen in our home.... I felt physically ill, wanted to vomit, couldn't eat for ten days. I believed intrinsically that he was going to come home, that the bubble was going to burst sooner or later and that he was going to see the light. Also this was something that was not going to happen to us. We were bigger than divorce. That's what I believed. I just had to nurse him through this period, keep it all together, to keep the home going with no jolts on the screen, to show him that I believed in him, ultimately, absolutely. I just felt I could do it. I was so determined this was going to work that nothing was going to be too much for me.

As I read the narratives above I am reminded that Myerhoff (1982:105), quoting Erving Goffman, speaks of "spoiled identities" and Gergen (1994:28) notes that "[w]e find our existence not separately from our relationships, but within them". As the participants navigate an alternative landscape of relational space and identity, at another level they are also migrating from the separation phase to the "liminal or betwixt and between" space in the rite-of-passage metaphor. This journey is not a simple linear progression, as evidenced by the narratives – it is more of a zig-zagging, dialectical process. Darron spoke of "the swinging": "One day I can be on top of things (feel she really did the right thing, did me a favour, I've really moved on with my life), one morning I will wake up in my bed and I will go 'I could kill her still'" (see 3.2). A

narrative approach to research and therapy replicates and enhances what happens in life itself, as the participants seek to make sense of their experience by linking memories into a framework. White (1995:32) describes this form of enquiry as illustrated in Figure 1 (u/o in figure 1 refers to “unique outcome”):

I’ve been trying to emphasize what might be referred to as a ‘zig-zagging process’. We might be somewhere in [the person’s] history talking about what particular events might reflect: *Well, on reviewing these events that took place then, what do they tell you about what was really important for your life?* So, in the referencing of one landscape to another, we have jumped from landscape of action to landscape of consciousness. And we can go the other way: *Are you aware of any other developments in your life that reflect this particular belief about what is important to you?* So we are now back in the landscape of action.



**Figure 1**

The journey metaphor, with its emphasis on acknowledgement of movement, can be linked to the poststructuralist backdrop that is associated with narrative practice, a position that sees all expressions of life as units of meaning and experience. “It is these expressions of life that significantly constitute our lives – it is these expressions that actually make our lives up”, writes White (2002a:14). In the separation phase Robert said: “I was shattered”. He spoke of his life “collapsing down”; in terms of identity he said “you in a sense become nobody”. Darron spoke of “losing everything”, being “stripped of everything” and of reaching a core of his humanity – he stopped eating and a friend had to remind him to breathe. He also lost 20kg in weight. Emma spoke of being “absolutely devastated”, and trying “to keep it all together”. Emma also couldn’t

eat, felt physically ill and wanted to vomit. Abigail, who had lived with infidelity for many, many years, spoke of embarrassment, humiliation and failure. Abigail reported feeling “very much the victim”. In the face of repeated denials Joan said “it would gnaw at me, gnaw at me and bug me”. In terms of identity, she reported: “I hated who I was becoming”. Lund (1990:61) comments on this radical restructuring of identity as described by the participants:

Divorce entails major role and identity transitions for women; it clearly disrupts identities based on marital and family roles and forces women to redefine themselves in the larger society.... The trauma of role transition in the divorce process left over half the women in the study feeling like ‘non people’, or ‘non wives’ for the first year after the divorce.

I am inclined to debate with Lund, as both the men and women attributed similar meaning to their experiences. The “radical disturbance of identity” was experienced most acutely when one of the partners gave voice to their intention to leave the marital relationship (as described by Darron and Robert) and when infidelity became visible (as described by Emma and Joan). These experiences (landscape of action) transported the participants from attachment to separation (rite-of-passage), from the known and familiar to the uncertain, from a robust sense of self to a position populated by self-doubt (landscape of identity). “The separation phase catapults people into the liminal phase ... at times this gives rise to despair, and when this cannot be comprehended in the context of a progressive journey, it can be difficult for people to endure it” (White 2002a:15). In the narratives this liminal phase appears to be characterized by the zig-zagging, dialectical journeying mentioned earlier, as the participants hold onto hope.

Initially, hope was held in the relationship as all of the participants, aware that all was not well in the relationship, were prepared to try harder, wanted to talk, asked for openness, saw counselling as an option and would have preferred the marriage to continue. Emma believed her husband was having some form of mid-life crisis and that she could nurse him through it, keep it all together and that nothing was going to be too much for her as she waited for him to “come home”. Darron spoke of choosing to ignore, of “trying harder and harder” and “doing more and more and more”. Abigail spoke about being a good wife and “doing the best I could”.

Juxtaposed with the “holding onto hope” were the ongoing discoveries of betrayal. Robert reported: “Suddenly you start discovering a new life you knew nothing about.” Joan said her husband “was leading a cloak and dagger kind of life” whilst she and the children “were leading a



withdrawn kind of life”. Eventually Joan’s husband left the marital home and she found out that “he was organized, got it all sorted out, he’d got his flat”. Hagemeyer’s (1986:240) words resonate with Joan’s experience, as he clarifies the impact of sexual affairs on the identity of the faithful spouse:

The loss of complete openness and trust develops when one or both partners begin to make commitments which take precedence over the marriage partner ... sexual affairs focus the energy away from the relationship. Now a marriage partner experiences being ‘deselected’.

In this experience of deselection negative identity conclusions take precedence. Abigail saw herself as a failure, Robert saw himself as muggins, Darron saw himself as stupid, Joan hated who she was becoming.

In Darron’s narrative the first of the sparkling moments can be seen (what he calls a defining moment), when he realizes that what he has been enduring and how he has been behaving “is not me” (see 3.4.3). Abigail has a similar turning point when she asks herself: “What am I staying for? I am a capable woman, I have a lot of courage, these have been difficult, tough years and I actually don’t love this man.” Opening space and asking questions around sparkling moments/unique outcomes in the person’s past contributes to the development of alternative identity constructions. As the questions zig-zag between landscape of action and landscape of identity, re-authoring takes place on a multiplicity of levels. Identity is re-authored, and the non-dominant story is rendered more visible. Payne (2000:108) refers to “encouraging the telling of ‘sub-plots’.” When questions were asked about the absent but implicit in Darron’s “not me”, space was opened for him to describe the me that is. Darron was then able to “thicken” and re-author his description of himself. Similarly, when Ronnie re-membered courage and capability, the problem saturated story of infidelity and failure gave way to a story of resilience.

When the infidel continues to lie, by omission or commission, and the faithful spouse is positioned in uncertainty, doubt and suspicion, but continues to stay and to work at the relationship, the tenuous hold on hope is eroded, and anger often makes its presence more strongly felt. All of the participants admitted to times of great anger, and it was at these times that feelings of exploitation, of being taken for a ride, of being taken for granted, of massive disrespect, were present. Re-authoring conversations created stepping stones leading to the

identification of defining moments and unique outcomes, by highlighting and deconstructing the feelings and the events which set them in motion. White (1995:91) clarifies:

Anger ... is one of those words that is part of a discourse that pathologises, obscures context, and limits possibilities for action in the world. But what about “outrage”? What about “passion” for justice? These interpretations or descriptions are part of a different discourse, one that brings with it options for addressing context, and options for the expression of this experience through action. Discourses are constitutive, they are shaping of our lives. Within the context of these alternative interpretations or descriptions, the experience that is so often referred to as anger is no longer something to be worked through, or some state of being, but something to be honoured.

O'Donohue (1998:239, 240) reiterates: “Behind the darkness of suffering a subtle brightness often manifests itself.... This is the deep beauty of soul where limitation and damage, rather than remaining forces that cripple, are revealed as transfiguration.” Anger, self-blame and guilt tend to become close companions to the faithful spouse, and the zig-zag movement is evident in the narratives as the participants struggled with blaming themselves and blaming the unfaithful spouse. Darron admits: “I did not want to see, I did not want to believe she was capable of this”. Emma said: “I think I believed I was the cause of all this, I was guilty, I had driven this man to this point”. Abigail speaks of the shame she felt when she believed “I couldn't keep this man faithful to me” (see 3.4.3).

Pittman's (1993:36) rationality appears elusive at this point in the journey: “One marriage partner can make the other miserable, but can't make the other unfaithful.... Patriarchal custom assumes that when a man screws around it must be because of his wife's aesthetic, sexual, or emotional deficiencies. She failed him in some way.” I encountered no gender difference in this regard – both male and female “faithful spouses” at some point appeared to blame themselves. Robert's reaction was “what did I do wrong?” and he later confessed that even after 11 years he was still living with the question: “What could I have done differently?” Robert expressed his longing, not just to know the truth, but to hear it from his wife. In this extract the effect on his emotions and his identity are highlighted, as he realized that others knew, and he was still being kept “in the dark”:

I wanted her to tell me. I set it up, arranged an interview, discussion, please I want to know what's going on. She never, to the day I left there, came clear. I would have gone away, feeling much happier, had she just come clean, and we could have cleared the air. I wanted her to tell me what went on. I wanted to know from her. I got so cross. I don't normally get angry in public, and I got so upset about it.

Emma's husband began a second affair, and he wrote to Emma giving her permission to date. This event sparked the anger which allowed Emma to contemplate legally ending the marriage after enduring eight years of infidelity. From seeing the relationship as "bigger than this", from seeing herself as "guilty" Emma became able to see herself as needing care and "ultimately I realized it just wasn't me".

Hagemeyer (1986:245) writes of the many losses sustained when separation takes place, including the loss of aspects of identity:

For most people, becoming married is the major attempt at gaining a certain part of one's identity. Becoming separated is a process of losing that part of the identity. Many individuals liken it to losing a limb. Each specific loss is like another part of their identity being lost. Letting go of parenting, driving the favourite car, gardening in the familiar back yard, eating with the family, enjoying the home and property, being seen by others together with the spouse and family, each slice diminishes the person and brings on a form of crisis in identity.

Letting go of the other and letting go of the relationship often involves a conscious choice for self. In this way hope is reclaimed for self. Just as hope makes a re-appearance, grief for the relationship is simultaneously held. Gass and Nichols (1988:8) warn that "the grief cannot be worked through if the infidel continues to deny and to lie to the spouse". Denial often keeps the faithful spouse in an oscillating position of pain and questioning. Losses are occurring, distance is felt, but infidelity is not clearly visible. In the narratives Joan and Emma both speak of having grieved whilst still married, as infidelity had been visibly present for many years. Hagemeyer (1986:244) confirms: "For a large minority of people, their time for grieving is nearly over when divorce arrives. Grief in response to losses which occurred months or years before has already been accomplished in some cases." For the men in the group, infidelity and divorce were swift and sudden, and grief came in the aftermath of shattered lives, shattered dreams and shattered identities. As mentioned in 2.2.2 Blomquist (1986:161) refers to divorce as an experience of death: the death of the marital relationship and death of intimacy: "It is the experience of an even deeper kind of death or series of deaths ... it is a time of discovering the depths of one's own woundedness, specifically with regard to the relationship which has ended." The multiple losses occurring in divorce are experienced often as losses of component parts of a person's identity. In the pastoral therapeutic gatherings Weingarten's (2000:402) words became a lived reality:

Hope is something we do with others. Hope is too important – its effects on body and soul too significant – to be left to individuals alone. Hope must be the responsibility of the community.

### **3.4.3 Reincorporation and rebirth**

You may think of catharsis in the popular sense as a purging of the emotions. A primal scream or voicing your anger may offer some relief from pent-up feelings. But catharsis also means having sharper ideas, clearer feelings, and a more defined sense of purpose.

(Moore 2004:52)

Hagemeyer (1986:243) notes: “The most difficult work of the divorce appears to revolve around the re-building of a separate identity, without the former spouse as a key reference point.” Listen for the growing clarity, new meaning and re-authoring of identity in the following narratives of reincorporation and rebirth following infidelity and divorce.

Robert – I’ve made a life, and things have got better and improved. I feel stronger. I’ve come through, I’m actually amazed that I didn’t break down - everything just went up, a pack of cards, you pulled out the bottom, the whole lot collapsed, and you had to start building up, right from scratch again. And you’ve got to build yourself up as well. You’ve just got to go forward, to reconstruct and get going again. You either wallow in self-pity as a victim of circumstance or you decide you want to move up and do something about it and start creating a life for yourself again. I feel very resourceful within myself. Because of all I’ve been through. I feel far more competent to deal with relationships now. I’ve had to try to understand my behaviour and what I bring to the relationship, and to deal with trauma, and to deal with rejection, and those sorts of things that put a lot of people off. It scares me as much as anybody else but I know I can deal with it.

Darron – I am now Darron, I am financially, emotionally, physically independent. For the first time in my life I am my own person.

I asked Darron how he had navigated the territory from the numbness to this new place:

I took a day at a time. I just used to say, when friends asked how I was ‘I’m rolling with the punches’. What got me through was wide, wide reading, divorce recovery workshop (really learned a lot through that), leaned heavily on my support structure, I have my faith and I think I reached very, very deep within myself. Mari (therapist) helped me through - after a lot of therapy, a lot of reflection, a lot of time – there is no one thing that did it. It was just grinding away at it – getting up every morning, saying ‘I am Darron, you can do this’.

I asked Darron: “Did you know that you had such a strong relationship with perseverance and tenacity?”

No, I courted fleetingly with it, very fleetingly. I battled at school academically, I just hung in there, three quarters of the way through my divinity degree I knew I was too young to go into the ministry, but I stuck it out. I went through the trauma of national service during the time of apartheid – it was disgusting, to be honest. I stuck it out. And in hindsight now, I think all those life experiences have helped me – gave me a sense of ‘you know, I can do this’. The first torrid love affair in high school, stuck it out when it didn’t work out – I think it all added to life experience. So in some ways I value my life experiences because I think it’s made me a lot deeper, more sensitive and more reflective and introspective, perhaps a person with more integrity, definitely a better teacher.

What have you brought to your teaching, that is different, that is “better”?

Empathy, compassion, maturity, wisdom (even though I am only 40), I’m doing the right thing with my life. If anything my divorce confirmed that. Very much so. I like to think that I have been empowered through my divorce, that I can take the quota from it. I enjoy the sunshine and the bush, a cold beer around the fire, I have my whole life to live still, I have my daughter, a good job, my health, my Land Rover, my little flat, I actually have a lot to be thankful for and slowly, over time, I realized that more and more and more. There are days when I still feel tense, days when I still feel anger (but it’s lesser, fewer and far between). But I have a strong sense that it’s definitely over now, I definitely can’t ever go back. It’s clear in my mind.

What brought you to that point of saying “It is over”?

Because I am worth more. I am worth so much more, I am a man of value, of integrity, of substance. And I think that’s clear in my mind now – it is over, and it’s part of the healing and moving on.

Joan – A huge thing for me was that in 1990 my mother dropped dead of a stroke. I went into a huge depression. I had never lost a family member before. My mother was like my soul mate, and I went through three years of absolute hell, with panic attacks, I was really a wreck. And I wasn’t going to go back into that pit and I thought I am not going to go back into that for him, definitely not. What this proved to me, and what made me feel good was that I knew I could survive. I am not the happiest I have ever been in my life; I am definitely the loneliest I’ve ever been in my life. However, I feel very content, I am at peace. I have a very strong sense of God’s grace in my life. And I know I am a different person now, I know I can be my authentic self. I like who I am now. I know who I am. I like my values. Even my daughter said: ‘I’ve so enjoyed getting to know you, because now I know Joan, I don’t know you as dad’s wife.’

Abigail – I do feel that I am moving to the victor and a situation where I can help other people. I’ve realized that the divorce doesn’t have the same pain anymore – it’s made me more gracious, grateful, that life is so good and that I am so fit. [I’m] feeling quite excited about the life that is ahead, there’s a huge freedom in it. I love my job, I get significance from my work, I do. I’ve moved, I’ve moved on, every month is better. It’s not a story of sadness. It is a time of excitement. I get up and decide what I want to do, what does Abigail want to do, not ‘is B. on call?’

Emma met someone during the time she was going through the legal divorce process. She describes her thoughts and feelings:

The timing of it, when I think back, couldn't have been better. It was fantastic. Because I was about to go through the final stages of a divorce which I didn't actually want, and here comes someone who has been through it all before. It gave me something else to think of. So when the day came it was bearable. I had done all the grieving beforehand; it had been a slow long grieving process. I feel completely emotionally cut off from him now. It took so long, and it took so long because I wasn't prepared to do anything about it sooner, and when the time came it came, good and proper.

The narrative approach to the pastoral therapeutic gatherings involved the process of drawing out and amplifying the invisible story lines and opening space for new meanings to emerge. Payne (2000:41) explains:

Self-stories can often be 'thin'; so a re-examination of the bases of these stories can lead to richer, more experience-near narratives, can give persons an enlarged sense of the possibilities of life, facilitate their overcoming problems, allow them to redefine their identities in more positive terms, and promote their movement towards effecting the changes they discover they wish to make.

As we re-searched history and looked at intentions, choices, values, influential relationships, turning points, treasured memories and how these areas connect with each other, katharsis and re-authoring took place. Skills and knowledges, sometimes lost in the problem saturated story, were rediscovered and re-membered in the alternative, preferred story. New knowledges and skills of living were discovered and implemented by the participants in this re-incorporation phase. Darron spoke of the importance of taking "a day at a time"; Robert spoke of making a decision to move, to create a new life for himself; Joan re-searched her history and made a decision "not to go back into that pit". The participants now hold a greater awareness of their influence over the problem. The themes of strength, compassion and grace emerged. They are inextricably linked and I will endeavor to explore them together, rather than trying to separate the strands.

Abigail, Joan and Darron all mention the role of faith and grace and there is a sense of God having been present through the divorce experience. God's presence appears to have been made manifest in grace, blessing and hope. Abigail speaks of "the graciousness of God, the amazing grace". Blomquist (1986:169) highlights the presence of hope, manifest through faith in God, during this period of re-incorporation, as evidenced by the narratives above:

The hope which tentatively emerges during the gestation period is affirmed as the time of rebirth as healing is experienced. This is not only an affirmation of God's presence in the past, but provides a foundation for the assurance of hope in God's presence in one's future.

Pastoral therapy is a collaborative endeavour: a collaboration between the person consulting the therapist, the therapist and God. Kornfeld (1997:84) describes this interconnected "web":

I believe when anyone first comes to us, the healing has already begun. God is present in the movement which has already begun to happen.... We participate in this healing as we continue to facilitate it ... We know that the resources for their healing are in them.... Our task is to look to find where God is doing the healing and where this healing is being facilitated in the inter-connected healing network. We become aware of being in an intricate, supportive healing web which connects us to each other. Our relationship to God binds up the space between us; creates community. Buber says this community creates an invisible altar.

Compassion grows out of suffering, of experiencing and witnessing suffering. We grow more compassionate towards ourselves, and we grow more compassionate towards others. In the narratives I was aware that in the midst of the suffering, anguish and anger, there was also a depth of compassion for the unfaithful spouse and for the children. Compassion invites us to be less judgmental as we acknowledge: "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Darron spoke of growing understanding and empathy for people who commit family murders. This compassion was born out of his own experience, his tormented nights, his awareness of his own anger and pain, and the close relationship between anger and the desire for revenge. Abigail spoke of her desire to become active in the divorce recovery programme of her church. Blomquist (1986:170) comments: "The experience of divorce may lead not only to growth in love and knowledge of self and God, but also love of others. It often gives rise to a new ability to be with and reach out to people who are hurting." In all the narratives of the participants quoted above I also sense a profound compassion and understanding and honouring of the self. Emma speaks of the new relationship, of the abundance of love she discovers she is able to give and says: "It's been so easy, which has been the most surprising thing of the lot". Robert says: "I feel stronger, I feel very resourceful within myself. Because of all I've been through." Darron claims: "I like to think that I have been empowered through my divorce." And Abigail speaks of the migration from victim to victor: "I do feel that I am moving to the victor ... I've moved, I've moved on, every month is better." In the initial problem saturated stories of infidelity and divorce betrayal, grief

and vulnerability were fore-grounded; they now take a back seat as empowerment, resilience and strength step forward in the development of the alternative story and preferred identity claims.

### **3.5 REFLECTIONS**

The ancient Greeks had two words for time, *chronos* and *kairos* (<http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2310&C=2308>). While the former refers to chronological or sequential time, the latter signifies “a time in between”, a moment of undetermined period of time in which “something” special happens. The term *kairos* is used in theology to describe the qualitative form of time. In the New Testament *kairos* means “the appointed time in the purpose of God”, the time when God acts (for example in Mark 1.15, the *kairos* is fulfilled). For Paul Tillich the “*kairoi*” are those crises in history which create an opportunity for, and indeed demand, an existential decision by the person (1936:14). In the *Kairos Document*, a liberation theology “manifesto” in South Africa under apartheid the term *kairos* is used to denote “the appointed time”, “the crucial time” into which the document / text is spoken. *Kairos* time is usually perceived as a time of crisis. The Chinese character for “crisis” is often claimed to be a combination of the characters for “danger” and “opportunity”. With this in mind, there is a possibility of participating in a “new creation”. There is both danger and opportunity, and chance to build something new out of the old. *Kairos* time bridges the tearing down of the “old way” with the building of a “new way”.

In the pastoral therapeutic gatherings, we attempted to track a sequence of events, over time, according to a “plot” (the impact on identity of infidelity and divorce) in the lives of five people. We found we couldn’t always remember chronologically. What we did experience, as evidenced in the narratives explored in this chapter, was a *kairos* time. The six weeks of the gatherings became a liminal space, “a time inbetween” when “something special” happened. The gatherings also facilitated the recognition of *kairos* as embedded in both journeys travelled: the research journey and the participants’ journeys through the landscapes of infidelity and divorce.

As a pastoral therapist, living out a vocation, I relate to the time we spent together as “an appointed time in the purpose of God”. Infidelity and divorce are a “crisis in personal



history”, a crisis which presents both the dangers of suffering and collapsed lives and the opportunity for healing and re-authoring lives and identities. In terms of liberation theology and the Kairos Document in South African history, I sense the resonance with the liberation experienced by the participants in their lives and in the pastoral therapeutic gatherings, human texts who were able to give voice to their experience, where a “close reading” took place, and a new creation was given birth to and rendered visible in the finding of voice. The participants speak of the meaning they discovered:

Robert – I’ve been through the fire, I’m invincible, I know I can deal with it.

Darron – For the first time in my life I am my own person.

Joan – I know I am a different person now, I know I can be my authentic self. I like who I am now. I know who I am. I like my values.

Emma – It has been hugely affirming, its just been the most affirming, happy making thing you could imagine, knowing I have so much to give ... has just been so wonderful, its been so easy, which has been the most surprising thing of the lot.

Abigail – I’ve realized that the divorce ... has made me more gracious, grateful, that life is so good and that I am so fit. [I’m] feeling quite excited about the life that is ahead, there’s a huge freedom in it.

### **3.6 CONCLUSION**

The socially constructed nature of identity has been explored in this chapter, within the context of the narratives of infidelity and divorce. Firstly, there was an exploration of ways in which identity is shaped by societal discourses during the marriage. Secondly the radical restructuring of identity which takes place during the seismic shift of infidelity, separation and divorce was examined: a restructuring process which is dialectical and consists of zigzag patterning. Thirdly, the re-authoring of identity during reconstruction and rebirth was identified. Chapter Four explores the effects of witnessing the narratives of infidelity and divorce in a group of faithful spouses.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### WITNESSING: EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF WITNESSING THE STORIES OF INFIDELITY AND DIVORCE IN A GROUP OF FAITHFUL SPOUSES

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter One opens with the words: *This research journey aims to explore the identity constructions and reconstructions of the so-called 'faithful spouse' in the face of infidelity and divorce.* In Chapter Three the individual narratives of the participants, as they described their journeys through infidelity and divorce, were voiced. This chapter focuses on the second aim: *To explore the effects of witnessing the stories of infidelity and divorce in a group of faithful spouses.* During the six weeks we met at Poustinia, the participants not only told their stories, they listened to each other's stories. This was an active listening, for the listeners became members of a reflecting team, and took up positions as witnesses (Weingarten 2003:11). This chapter introduces and deconstructs the concept of witnessing by drawing on research and offering the voices of various authors. The participants' own voices are used in an exploration of the effects of witnessing in the group, as they describe their experience.

#### 4.2 WITNESSING

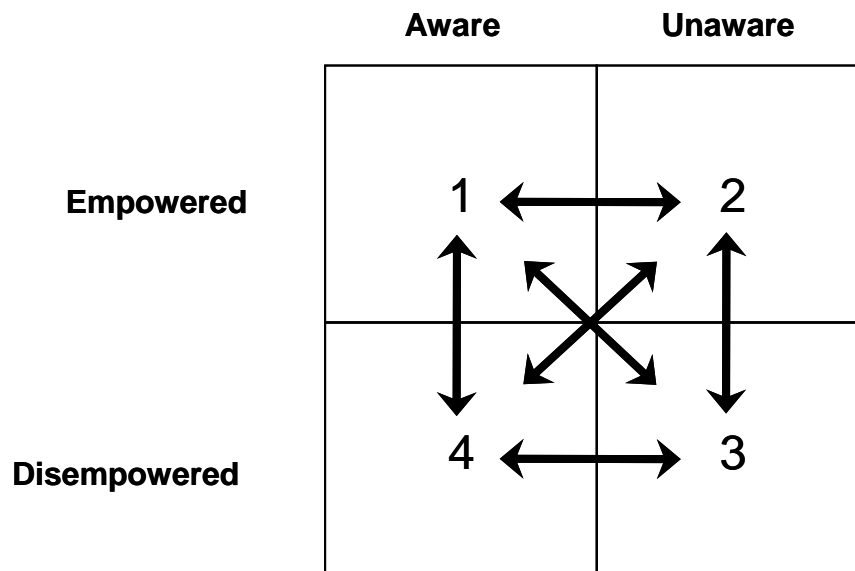
##### 4.2.1 Witness Positions

Weingarten introduces a spectrum of "witnessing experience", ranging from passive, inadvertent, unintentional, intentional to compassionate witnessing (2003:11). Coexisting with these variations are a limited number of "witness positions." Figure 2 presents a graphic representation of Weingarten's model. The two by two grid shows that a witness position is influenced by the witness's level of awareness and sense of empowerment in relation to any aspect of what is being witnessed.

	Aware	Unaware
Empowered	1	2
Disempowered	4	3

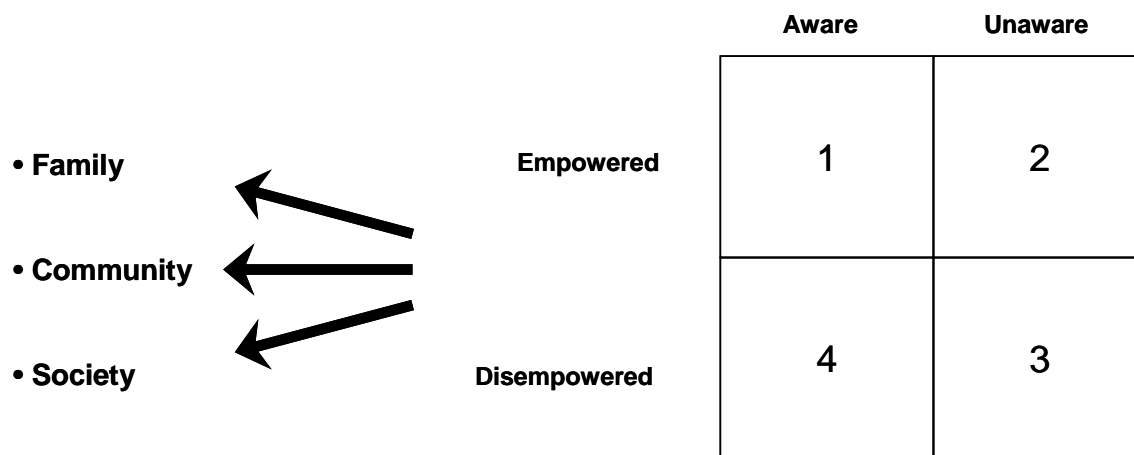
**Figure 2**

Witness positions may thus be taken up in relation to different aspects of complex situations and may also change over time (Figure 3). Disempowerment may make its presence felt in the light of awareness and passivity in the witnessing experience. Weingarten writes of the desirability and difficulty of holding a position that is both aware and active (2003:30).



**Figure 3**

Ultimately, every witness position creates consequences for the individual, family, community and society (Figure 4). Witnessing becomes “a mode of responding to the other’s plight ... that becomes an ethical involvement” (Hatley 2000:3). Every position carries possibilities, challenges and risks. As researcher I take up the position of aware and active witness. This position is informed by self reflexive, participatory consciousness and the desire to collaborate as a practical theologian, engaging with people in their lived experience. McTaggart (1997:34) argues that “[i]ndividual action researchers change themselves, support others in their effort to change and together work to change institutions and society”. I question McTaggart’s view that researchers change themselves. Is it not that as researchers are called to active, aware witnessing that they, together with the research participants, are changed, as illustrated in figure 3? Or does McTaggart imply that researchers change themselves (as agents) or that they themselves are changed (as in “they cannot escape change”)? A structuralist position would determine witnessing as a context for people to become more truly who they really are, whereas a poststructuralist position sees the witnessing experience as an opportunity for people to become “other than who they were” (White 2000:75,76).



**Figure 4**

#### **4.2.2 Compassionate witnessing**

Weingarten warns that the “witnessing coin” has two sides. Guided by the ethical commitment to “do no harm” these words of Weingarten (2003:27) sound a warning: “An aware witness may suffer. In fact, witnessing experiences may evoke a wide range of feelings.” Certain kinds of

witnessing can harm us, “while another, compassionate witnessing, when conditions are safe and we have deliberately chosen our action, can be positive. It is important to pace yourself at a rate that you can manage without getting comfortably upset or going numb” (Weingarten 2003:19). These wise words became a guide, a checking point, throughout the research journey. After each conversation, and at the beginning of each gathering, the participants had a chance to say how they were experiencing the effects of witnessing. Darron commented: “I did experience angst in rehashing my experiences. But it was well handled by you and the group who remained sensitive at all times.” On our last evening the group agreed that the number of participants and the number of meetings had been sufficient. We felt we were reaching a saturation point, beyond which we would not be able to listen compassionately and with full attention and awareness.

Weingarten (2003:22) uses both postmodern and feminist theory to propose that bearing witness is a systemic process of meaning-making, where the ability to witness depends on a willingness to assume the risks associated with authentic connections. Witnessing provides hope when it is an inclusive process, which accounts for context, and moves beyond silencing or debate to make room for a richer understanding of meaning. Witnessing does not require agreement about this meaning, but instead demands vulnerability. Without vulnerability, witnessing is a hollow, disconnecting experience.

This concept of “compassionate witnessing”, with its accompanying vulnerability and hope, became a lived reality in the pastoral therapeutic gatherings which took place at Poustinia. The compassion, vulnerability and hope were evidenced in two primary ways – within the group and within the individual.

#### **4.2.2.1 Club of Life: A group of faithful spouses becomes a community of faithful spouses**

Divorce often enforces a radical social restructuring as explained by Hagemeyer (1986:243):

Friends usually take on a changed view of the individual experiencing divorce. Some social circles, especially couples, may exclude one altogether, in part because of their own uncomfortable feelings rather than outright disapproval. Likewise, a change in attitude by the faith community is often unintentional, but nevertheless experienced as ostracism and disapproval.

Emma writes of her experience, which confirms Hagemeyer’s treatise:

One of the most painful things to come to terms with has been realizing who your real friends are. When people who have previously been close friends are able to neglect and forget about you, it is soul destroying. When they are unable to face you even, or phone to say I no longer need you, it is very hard.

A common effect of the witnessing in the group was the movement from isolation and aloneness to shared experience. Six individuals “connected” through common experience: compassionate witnessing evoked resonance and relatedness. Robert, Joan and Emma describe their experience:

Robert – Hearing other people’s stories makes me realize the commonality of experience we have all been through – in a sense we are not alone in our experience although that is what it feels like at the time.

Joan – Listening to Darron it’s amazing how many similarities come, when you have had infidelity – like when he spoke about seeing the symptoms but not accepting, I can relate to that completely.... I feel it’s like having a common bond with people that have gone through the same pain. It’s been great to speak to people who *really* know what its like.

Emma – There were things that resonated with me, but they have all been spoken, they’ve all been detailed already.

Darron answered the question: What did the process open up for you?

The opportunity to realize that many people have similar life experiences and that essentially we are not alone on this journey even though we feel like it at times.

Compassionate witnessing invites people to join with each other. The pastoral therapeutic gatherings expanded the boundaries of each person’s support, beyond their families and friends, to a community of caring persons. This way of “being with others” is described by Tutu (in Krog 1998:143) (see 1.6.2.2):

In the Africa *Weltanschauung* of Ubuntu, a person is not basically an independent, solitary entity. A person is human precisely in being enveloped in the community of other human beings, in being caught up in the bundle of life. To be ... is to participate.

Anderson and Foley (1998:45) expand on this concept of being as participating by highlighting listening and responding, two key aspects of compassionate witnessing, and making visible the link between compassionate witnessing and care:

Listening carefully and responding accurately to the story of another is a true ministry. To be understood and accepted by another person is a treasured dimension of human living. It is also the first movement of any kind of care.

As relationships developed in the pastoral therapeutic gatherings Myerhoff's (1982:11) notion of "membered lives" came to mind. The notion of re-membering suggests possibilities for engagement in a revision of relationships. Myerhoff (1982:11) describes re-membering as "a purposive, significant unification". White (1997:23) suggests that "through re-membering practices, persons can suspend or elevate, revoke or privilege, and downgrade or upgrade specific memberships of their lives". Of particular significance to this research journey are these words of White (2000:124):

It is in this way, through re-membering practices, that persons can have more to say about whose voices are to be recognized on *matters of their identity*.... In these acts, a person experiences the stories of their lives linked to the stories of the lives of others around particular themes and shared values and commitments.... The sense of being joined in this way, and of experiencing one's life more richly described, contributes to new possibilities for action in the world. It also renders persons less vulnerable to experiences of being alone in the face of adversity – it provides an antidote to a sense of isolation (emphasis mine).

"The image of membered lives brings into play the metaphor of a 'club' – a club of life is evoked" (White 1997:22). The metaphor White (1997:22) applies "opens up options for the exploration of how a person's club of life is membered – of how this club of life is constituted through its membership ... this metaphor suggests unique possibilities for action". In the disintegration of friendship in the face of infidelity and divorce, an opportunity for re-membering a "club of life", presents itself. Darron captures this concept in an email dated 25 July 2007, a few weeks after the group had ceased to meet and a social get-together had been planned for December:

I'm not sure about you guys, but I really miss all of you very much and waiting for December is just not working for me! I really feel that we all risked so much and we all worked so hard to build up a trust relationship in love and support for one another, that I really feel that it is a shame to let this go to waste? My proposal: Maybe meet once a month for a bring-and-share light snack dinner taking turns at one another's homes? Just an idea? Will someone please forward this to Joan? Take care, my fellow divorcees....

Darron's email speaks of the vulnerability ("we all risked so much"), the relationships that developed ("we all worked so hard to build up a trust relationship in love and support for one another"), the *communitas* ("my fellow divorcees"), the desire for no one to be left out ("please forward this to Joan"), and a proposal for action ("a monthly social meeting"). Whilst White's notion of a club of life refers to people who have been part of someone's life, I am using the metaphor on two levels. At the first level I subscribe to White's notion: the participants were engaged in a review of the membership of their individual "club of life". Spouses no longer had privileged membership and friendships were being sifted through. At another level a "club" was being formed at Poustinia, as a group of faithful spouses, gathered for a limited time, traversing common ground, formed a "common bond." Some of the participants became keen to continue meeting, and formed friendships, thereby inviting each other to become "life members" of their individual club of life. Some became members for a season only. In these ways compassionate witnessing, within community, with its accompanying compassion, vulnerability and hope, became lived reality.

The second way in which compassionate witnessing was evidenced in the pastoral therapeutic gatherings was in the relationship with self. Self witnessing requires a self reflexive consciousness.

#### **4.2.2.2 Witnessing self**

Weingarten (2003:27) explains self witnessing and its correlation with self-awareness and meaning making:

All of us, whichever role we are currently in, can witness ourselves. We can become aware of what we see – witnessing ourselves as witnesses. We can become aware of what has happened to us – witnessing ourselves as victims. And we can become aware of what we do to others – witnessing ourselves as perpetrators. More able to witness ourselves in each of these roles, we will be better able to witness others in each of these roles as well.

Weingarten's text highlights the shifts between landscape of action ("we become aware of what we see ... we become aware of what has happened to us") and landscape of identity ("witnessing ourselves as victims ... as perpetrators").



Darron, Emma and Joan had spoken about the efficacy of writing and keeping a journal in the days and weeks after infidelity had made its presence felt. Darron lent me a copy of his diary for the period 31 August to 21 September. As I read it, I sensed the migration of identity. His first entry reads: “I am now in my seventh week – I am just in so much pain, I am just so sad.” Later he reflects: “I am doing this all on my own”, but a little further on he lists the names of “people who have been there for me”. The last entry reads: “...don’t want her back – I deserve better, much better”. Keeping a journal, writing letters, is a way of witnessing the self. Awareness is a key element in developing the capacity for self-witnessing. The following extract from Joan’s narrative highlights her journey during the week after her witnessing of a plenary discussion subsequent to the conversation with Robert. Her comments highlight her navigation of landscape of consciousness and landscape of identity, her journey from unawareness to awareness, from passivity and position as victim, to a position of action and self-awareness:

And then, for me, what gave me most thought, was Darron saying what was the cost of a divorce, and I’ve thought all week about it and I’ve realized just how much of a cost there is and I was telling Penny and Darron today a colleague of my husband’s, we’ve known the couple for years, he passed away, and I can’t go to the funeral and that’s a huge cost to me and things like that I’ve become very aware of exactly what the cost has been.... Trust, all sorts of things that were part of me, are now gone ... other relationships, I have a wall, I am barricading myself, I thought about it last week, and I thought this is ridiculous, I am allowing the cost of having trust taken away from me, to think that I can never ever trust or have a relationship ever again, which is ridiculous ... even if you are vulnerable to at least be vulnerable not to preempt what might be.

As Joan witnessed others, she also witnessed herself, and found herself invited into a compassionate self-witnessing position, acknowledging “how much of a cost there is ... a huge cost to me”. She became aware of, and able to give voice to her position: “I have a wall, I am barricading myself.” In this awareness passivity and victimhood gave way to new possibilities for action in the world: “even if you are vulnerable at least be vulnerable” (rather than barricading the self behind a wall and preempting possible hurt). Vulnerability has its roots in the Latin *vulnerabilis* meaning “wounding”, “likely to injure”. Blomquist (1986:161) writes: “While the divorce experience can confront people with brokenness, limits, sinfulness, and changing concepts of meaning, it can also challenge them to move to new places, to choose life in a new way.” Blomquist (1986:165) continues with a warning: “Wounds are deep and the fear of being wounded again is often stronger than the hope for healing. At times, one can only hope for hope”.

Joan's words confirm that a witness does not retain a neutral position. Her witnessing position invited engagement and the resonance and reverberations brought an opportunity for constitutive effects that could be reshaping of her life. In Joan's narrative courage is foregrounded, hope is evidenced and White's (1997:61) words offer confirmation: "Rather than encouraging us to join the great cultural pursuit of 'becoming more truly who we really are', re-membering conversations raise options for us to be 'other than who we were'."

In the following extract Darron comments on the effects of witnessing the conversation with Abigail. The resonance he experiences as he witnesses sets off a reverberation that moves him from witnessing another to a compassionate witnessing of self:

You know what resonates with me strongly as well, you kept saying, you said a few times now 'I did the best I could' and I have also realized that when I look back at the time if I can do all that again, even how I handled the divorce at the time, I would probably have done it exactly the same. I just did the best, it was what I could do at the time, and I just did the best I could. I mustn't be so hard on myself all the time.

Aware, compassionate witnessing of self and others, particularly within a group context and within a context of similarity where the people who witness have recently been in the same predicament, requires courage (Weingarten 2003:211,217). For compassionate, aware, intentional witnessing to remain robust, one needs to be able to move flexibly between witnessing others and witnessing oneself. This flexibility of movement and courage is evidenced in the narratives which follow.

### **4.3 WITNESSING NARRATIVES**

A safe space needs to be created where people can be "heard into speech" (Morton 1985:202) for the antidote to silence is the creation of a story. In the opening plenary each week all of the participants gave voice to the effects of witnessing the previous week's story, of effects which had germinated and made their presence felt during the previous week. This plenary time created a space where the participants could story the "not yet said" (Anderson & Goolishian 1992). Three of the participants spoke of their previous difficulties in giving voice to their experience:

Joan – I have always been protective of the people in my life. Until he actually left I never told anybody.

Robert – The other thing, Darron could speak about it, I found I couldn't speak about it, I couldn't be open about it, I tried to work it out in my mind before I could discuss it with anybody, and it was so difficult.... It had nothing to do with pride; it was complete inability to come to terms with it.

Emma – And I would also have kept silent with my friends, except they saw me withering away.

The plenary discussion was followed by a one on one conversation between me as researcher and the participant whose story was to be centered. During the conversation the group formed a reflecting team (see 3.2), thereby becoming witnesses to the stories of infidelity and divorce. During this first stage of witnessing the group was invited to listen intently, orienting their listening to the experience of the person being interviewed whilst reflecting on those aspects of their own lived experience that linked them to whatever captured their attention. During the second stage, group members engaged in re-authoring responses to those expressions which they deemed significant. These responses were deconstructed or embodied by being situated in the context of their own purposes, imagination and lived experience. Group members responded by talking about some of the particularities of their own histories, particularities that were evoked by witnessing the conversation.

White (1997:102) indicates the importance of Bachelard's (1969) account of the "image". Bachelard's interest was with the images of one's life that are evoked by "states of reverie, and in how these images set off reverberations that reach into personal history. In response to these reverberations, certain experiences of the events of one's life light up through resonation". White (1997:10) comments further:

It becomes possible for group members to shape their responses in ways that are identifying of the images that set off the reverberations that these experiences of their history resonated with, and to do this in ways that honour what it was that evoked these images of their lives.

After bearing witness to the conversation with Darron, Robert commented on the images:

A lot stirred, but revisiting my situation – rethinking the whole process, getting the logic in one's mind – resort to bringing it back up in front of you and to look at it again. Mine goes back a lot further than two years. So, it was – thinking, and picking up some of the points he made, and thinking of it in terms of how I reacted. It started the whole mental process again ... I've been thinking about it all week. A whole lot of memories have now been brought up to the surface again.

After bearing witness to the conversation with Robert during the opening plenary the following week, Darron commented on some of the effects and resonances of the conversation:

Rob, I thought about you a lot this week ... you are the first guy I've met who has walked a fairly similar road, and a few things really stood out for me.... I also heard that you said you are very content with your life and you have a wonderful relationship with your children and that you are generally at peace with where you are now. So that stood out for me as well, and that gave me tremendous hope. It was juxtaposed with this life experience that all of us will always carry, I've been thinking about you every day because I can see myself in you. And also, waking up alone every morning in my townhouse I think, you know what, Rob is at peace with this, its okay. We had this discussion afterwards, around the counter, I asked Rob if he lives alone, he said, yes he does, and he's got used to it now. Its still an adjustment for me, I thought there is hope for me, maybe I will get used to it. So in a way you are very much a guiding light for me, I must be honest. But also, in the respect of the hurt that is still part of you and I think will always stay part of me as well.

Robert's narrative resonated with that of Darron ("[we've] walked a fairly similar road"). The image of waking alone reverberated for Darron, and as he reflected on the image of Robert waking alone, now "used to it", Darron felt hope, where previously there had been despair. This shared sentiment ties in with what Weingarten (2000:402) describes: "Hope is something we do with others. Hope is too important – its effects on body and soul too significant – to be left to individuals alone. Hope must be the responsibility of the community."

Within the resonances and reverberations certain common themes emerged:

1. The effects of listening to men speak
2. The effects of witnessing sex talk
3. Lies, deceit, the death of intimacy and the search for truth
4. The commitment vs. divorce resonance
5. Shifting paradigms: an invitation to think and to see differently
6. The journey metaphor, particularly the "moving on" discourse.

#### **4.3.1 The effects of listening to men speak**

Graham (1999:193) writes of the importance of practical theology in "finding a voice for women":

The field of practical theology is crucial as the forum within which the concrete, specific and immediate pastoral needs of women are articulated.... Thus, the first generation of feminist practical theology can usefully be surveyed in terms of its protest against the exclusion and objectification of women within the Christian pastoral tradition; its emphasis on pastoral care as finding a voice for women, and the empowering nature of “hearing into speech” and of transforming the life of the Church and society in the light of such ‘counternarratives’ to the traditions of neglect and denigration.

In opposition to the quote above the voices of the research participants highlight the silence of *men’s* voices in the divorce recovery field. Hearing Darron and Robert give voice to their narratives of infidelity and divorce evoked profound responses. For Darron and Robert it was a unique experience to hear another man articulate his journey through similar territory. For the women in the group, it was the first time any of them had heard a man speak about his experience of infidelity. This awareness is echoed by Gass and Nichols (1988:3):

The exact proportions of married males and females who conduct a sexual and emotional relationship with a partner other than their spouse is not known. Estimates range up to two thirds for males and nearly half of the females.

As researcher, it had been of utmost importance to me that the group was to include both genders. It appears to be a common female societal discourse, particularly amongst women who have been betrayed by their husbands, that men are the philanderers whilst the wives remain faithful. I was keen to unmask this discourse.

I thought it might be healing for the female participants to hear men’s stories, to be able to see them, not only as perpetrators of infidelity, but also as vulnerable to infidelity and divorce. The women in the group were profoundly moved as they listened to the men’s stories. To be moved in the witnessing of expressions of life, in the sense that this is transporting, can be defined as a kathartic experience (White 2000:76). For the members of the witnessing team to be together moved in this way evokes “communitas”, a unique sense of being present with each other. The participants, of both genders, report the effects of listening to the men’s narratives:

Darron – It’s so amazing listening to a man sharing a similar experience, because all the people who have shared with me over the last two years have been female. Its been very difficult to find someone to share but apart from G, who can’t articulate as well as you can, this has been a brilliant experience for me and I really want to thank you very much.

Robert – What I responded to, related to, was this whole disempowering process. You know, I don't know if that is a male thing, one day you are this father figure and you have this household, and you have these children and that's your life and the next day the whole thing gets turned upside down and in a sense you become nobody, those relationships are taken away from you in a sense and however much you would like to change that process you can't, you can't do anything about it and you get very cross about the whole legislative background whereby in a sense we are the guys who make the laws but why do we make these stupid laws that disempower ... the custody of the children taken away from you – and here, through no fault of your own you're in a situation where the women does this, takes the kids, and you are just left there, you can't do a damn thing about it – how much you don't want it, feel this shouldn't happen to you, never envisaged this happening in your life and here its happening in your life and you can't change it, and you can't stop it, and suddenly the whole edifice of your life just crumbles.

Emma – I felt enormously privileged to listen to what he said. I've never heard a man open up like that. I haven't had the opportunity to listen to a man talking about his experience – it's the kind of thing you read about. I felt touched. I empathized with him.

Joan – I haven't been to therapy at all and I've never listened to people who have given a whole witness of infidelity, its different talking to friends. Also, what for me, when I say strange, I don't mean strange, normally the only people you get it from is women, I have never heard a man speaking about it. It did make me think. And I also felt, coming from a man it was really very strong, because my husband does not talk emotion, so to hear a man speak about emotion like that.... Coming from a man, thinking they are more vulnerable than women, left on their own, the woman gets the home and the kids and the furniture and everything that makes a home a home, and usually that happens when you are talking about a woman because it's a man, but here, where it wasn't Darron's doing at all – although it does take two to tango – you found yourself in the situation, and you are the vulnerable party, and that makes me feel sad.

Abigail – On the divorce workshop I went to it was 90% women – I have wondered if it is that men battle to share more or because women share more openly or ask for help, or men mess around more than women? You know, you become a bit cynical. But I think what I connected to was this defining moment, you know for the rest of my life I will know exactly the day, the time and the hour and funnily enough I remember the day so clearly and I was so disappointed when I phoned my husband on the 11th February and we had been divorced for a year and he said “oh, is that the date?” and I was quite hurt, and he said “I don't choose to remember dates like that” and I remember the exact last time we made love and it was such a defining moment and I don't know if it's a shallowness or he just chooses to – so its quite interesting for me to hear a man say he has a moment and a time and he knows the day – it makes me feel better.

Making the movement from “terrible silence” to “transforming hope” means not only giving voice to women, but to men too (Graham 1999:185). A migration from passive witnessing to active, compassionate witnessing also entails a movement from disempowerment to empowerment at family, community and societal levels (see Figure 4). Robert's narrative speaks

powerfully of the disempowerment he experienced as he lost his wife, his marriage, his home, his lifestyle, and the custody of his children. Within the pastoral therapeutic gatherings the active, compassionate witnessing invited understanding and empathy to make their presence felt.

#### **4.3.2 The effects of witnessing sex talk**

Current divorce recovery programmes offered by churches are modernistic in their approach with prescribed content (Skidmore 2002:38). DivorceCare is a fairly typical programme, offering a 13 week workshop covering the following topics: What's happening to me, the road to healing, facing your anger, facing your depression, facing your loneliness, what does the owner's manual say? (why the Bible is important), new relationships, financial survival, kidcare, forgiveness, reconciliation, and moving on, growing closer to God.

Three of the research participants had attended divorce recovery workshops. Two of the participants found the workshops to be helpful. Darron commented:

What got me through was wide, wide reading, divorce recovery workshop (really learned a lot through that), leaned heavily on my support structure, and I think I reached very, very deep within myself. Mari helped me through – slowly, slowly it began to lift after a lot of therapy, a lot of reflection, a lot of time.

However, none of the workshops focused on infidelity or sexual wounding (as mentioned in 2.2.3). The pastoral therapeutic gatherings opened space for talking about sex and infidelity and these conversations evoked resonance and reverberations in the witnesses:

Darron – I could identify with that very strongly... having sexual relations ... the demonstrative love wasn't there for me ... I wonder if this is how it is meant to be? I couldn't help thinking about this very story you told us about making love to your ex wife and what she said to you. Mine wasn't as radical ... I looked up at her face and she was staring out of the window. And she might not have said anything but I knew immediately she wasn't there. And I think you must have had a very similar experience. It had a huge impact on my sexuality, you can't just go to bed with someone else a year later and think everything is all right.

Robert – I had come out of a relationship where we had had a good sex life, and suddenly everything stops, you know, a couple of months after that one is, how does one say, frustrated and susceptible. But I was absolutely incapable of performing, absolutely incapable, incapable – having gone from 15 years of a very successful sexual

relationship, never a problem. This happened, absolutely incapable, frankly, it's quite traumatic, and it's very difficult to deal with, very difficult. I was absolutely impotent.

Darron – I resonate strongly. It's so nice to hear I'm not the only guy. It takes a long time to rebuild. It's not overnight rebuild stuff. I went to see my doctor for some muti – he said: “No problem, Darron, I get loads of guys coming through here in the same position.”

Abigail – My reaction has been the inability to be attracted to any man for two years. And it's not mistrust, I can't even imagine the act of sex – it's getting better – the thought of sex, and I call it sex as opposed to love.

Darron spoke about the difficulty of sexual intimacy in a new relationship:

When you have slept with one person for over 20 years it's very hard to get them out of your mind.... I [have] connected with a woman who has been through a divorce – her husband had had an affair, she has three children, she's younger than me. And there's this huge connection because we understood exactly where we were both coming from – we had both battled with spouses' infidelity, we both had to rebuild our lives, our sense of self-esteem, we were both parents. And for me that connection was fundamental to this relationship.

These extracts contributed to the opening of space for conversation within the group for informal discussion around sexuality, the problems encountered with sexuality within new relationships and the ethical dilemma for Christians around sex outside of marriage. When Abigail went on her first date the group offered her interest, support and encouragement. When vulnerability and disappointment made an appearance, the group offered comfort; they “joined” with her.

#### **4.3.3 Lies, deceit, the death of intimacy and the search for truth**

“The loss of complete openness and trust, Bohannon's ‘Emotional Divorce’, develops when one or both parties begin to make commitments which take precedence over the marriage partner,” writes Hagemeyer (1986:240). The loss of openness, trust and emotional intimacy was a common experience in the group and the reverberations were felt in the witnessing of each other's narratives. The breakdown of trust and commitment were discussed in depth in the gatherings. In all of the participants' marriages their spouse had been engaged in another relationship for some time before the infidelity became visible. When the faithful spouses confronted the infidel, four out of the five of them denied infidelity. Only Emma's husband admitted to a relationship when confronted, although at the time of the confrontation the extra-marital relationship was already three years old. Robert speaks of the devastation evoked by the breakdown of trust:



You're the one always trying to search, to find out, most of the other people probably know more about the whole process than you do, quite frankly. You are the one trying to catch up and find out what's going on. I felt this overwhelming desire to find out actually the truth, to find out what happened. You know, because you just get the snow job, and you are trying to find out what's going on, it's your life, and you are in a catch up mode, trying to find out what the hell is going on. I felt this whole trust bond – to me it's so critical – you've committed yourself to this person, to be totally upfront and open and honest in the relationship, and suddenly it goes by the wayside. And even in divorce one wants to have that trust, why can't one have that trust even in a divorce situation. If they are open and honest about it you can deal with it and retain the trust.

Robert's narrative highlights the impact of the deceit that accompanies infidelity. Hagemeyer (1986:3, 6, 15) deconstructs deceit and a possible effect thereof on the faithful spouse:

Conducting an extra-marital affair typically involves lying to one's spouse.... Lying is an action chosen by someone who deliberately decides to misinform or mislead another person. There are two basic ways to lie, by concealing and by falsifying. It is at this stage, typically, that the particularly destructive form of behaviour we have labeled gaslighting enters the picture. The husband gaslights or distorts reality in an effort to convince his spouse that she is crazy, that what she is perceiving is not happening.... When the fact of an affair becomes known, it often sends the wife into an examination of what she 'did wrong' .... Many of the things that have been said here regarding women's reactions to gaslighting on the part of their husband would apply to a man who is gaslighted by his wife.

In my initial one-on-one conversation with Emma she said that when she discovered the infidelity she asked herself: "Is this my fault?" In the gathering both Joan and Abigail gave voice to that which Hagemeyer refers to: Joan speaks about insanity, Abigail wonders what she has done wrong, and Emma comments on the resonance:

Joan – That's what kills you, doubting them, doubting yourself. All the ones who are having the affairs, I've never heard anyone who will actually sit down and give you the answers you want, like you were saying, and you also, even though we know what's going on, and like for me, I know he's living with her, I know who she is, but there is still, I think I've got to the point now where I don't care anymore, but there was a point when it was so important. If he would just have sat down and said this is where it started, this was this and that was that, and just let me get a few answers – it drives you insane – it's the cruelest thing of the lot and it drives you insane that they still have that power ... where they can't release – even though you know it's all done – but they won't give you that much leeway.

Abigail – For me, it was what's wrong with me? I wanted to know why. What have I done wrong? I needed to know: was I not good in bed, was I controlling, what, what? Infidelity, is it not our inability to keep them sexually happy?

Emma – I also at first wanted to know exactly what was going on, where he'd been and I would try and get him to account for what happened from A to B, it's all suspicion really, because I knew what was going on, and, and I'd want to try and find a diary and try and see what entries he might have written, and I remember going to his cellphone. But the same sort of feeling, of what I might find, I need to know, I need to know.

The death of intimacy is inextricably linked to infidelity. This is confirmed by Blomquist (1986:161): "Among many other deaths, large and small, the divorce experience includes the death of intimacy." The need to have questions answered, the need to know what is actually going on, speaks of a desire for connection, for communication, for openness, honesty and intimacy. Both Robert and Darron expressed their preference for honesty:

Darron – I always said to G, for years, if you have an affair at work, we can talk about it, we can sort this out – I did think if she's having an affair with this guy, we can work through this.

Robert – I could have dealt with it far more effectively if she had said up front "This is the situation, met XYZ, whatever, whatever, how can we work it out?" It could have been dealt with.

The search for an elusive truth can be disempowering, frustrating and hopeless. However, a postmodern, social constructionist stance implies an acceptance of the position that there are no essential truths, as Burr (1995:27) indicates:

Social interaction of all kinds, and particularly language, is of great interest to social constructionists. The goings-on between people in the course of their everyday lives are seen as the practices during which our shared versions of knowledge are constructed. Therefore what we regard as "truth" (which of course varies historically and cross-culturally) i.e. our current accepted ways of understanding the world, is a product not of objective observation of the world, but of the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other.

Rather than attempting to pin down an elusive truth Bons-Storm's (1998:18) account of truth invites us to see truth as contextual, a position that invites hope:

Truth can be understood as the road towards liberation from oppression and alienation, through changing landscapes and changing contexts. It is an avowed truth of where one stands 'for the time being'.

As in any migratory process, confusion, hopelessness and disorientation reign in the liminal or "betwixt and between space" (White 1995:100). The strong desire for answers and understanding

masks a desire to understand “where we stand.” The migration metaphor is useful in that it assists in the mapping of experience, as previously uncharted territory is navigated, from marriage, through infidelity, separation and beyond. A trajectory called a “migration of identity” is simultaneously taking place. Plotting the location enables the faithful spouse to find the truth of where they stand “for the time being”.

#### **4.3.4 The commitment vs. divorce resonance**

The group was unanimous in their relationship with commitment and their view of marriage as a life-long partnership. All had an abhorrence of divorce, viewing it as failure. Blomquist (1986:162) confirms this position: “Most persons of faith who have experienced divorce comment with feelings of anguish, sadness, frustration, failure, and often guilt, that they had ‘married for life’.”

Darron – I had high ideals – divorce would never enter the picture – determined to ensure it would never happen to me – met a girl from a Christian home, Christian community – divorce never entered my paradigm or my world, when it finally did, the fact that I had no control whatsoever– the most disempowering experience I have ever been through. The disempowerment – for me, divorce was never going to happen.

Emma – There were quite a few things from Darron’s story that resonated with me. When he answered the first question (what were your hopes for your marriage?) I think Darron’s answers were very much what mine were – just would never and could never happen and was not going to. I had also grown up in a broken family, I was even more determined that it was not going to be something that I was going to pass on to my children. I also thought divorce represented failure and was determined to not even go there. Commitment was very strong. I would have done anything to keep it together.

Robert – My daughter came home from school one day and she was telling us about a friend at school whose parents had divorced, and how traumatic it was. She then said to us, she expressed concern about divorce and that possibly it might happen to her. And I recall assuring her, from the depths of my heart, that there was no possibility of that happening to us. And that was an absolute conviction, there was no doubt in my mind whatsoever, not 1000,1 % doubt in my mind that this would ever happen to us, and I assured her that that was absolutely impossible as far as we were concerned and you can rest assured that will never happen. That’s how I felt about the relationship. To me, one got married and that was the end of the story – you just got married and you did what you had to do. We had a happy marriage as far as I was concerned. I was very happy in the marriage.

Abigail – I do hate the label divorce. When you get married it’s not something you even think of. In my family there is nobody who is divorced. I come from a happy family and I am the first in our family to be divorced. So for me it’s not an easy thing to be and I feel like, the word to me is associated with failure and you can’t stand up and explain to

somebody “well, this and this and this happened, this is why I’m divorced.” We were talking about that the other night, having to tick the divorce block, I resent it too. I want to tick the box and say ‘not my fault’, you know, sort of have to qualify it, which one can’t.

Joan – I was definitely in the marriage for ever. For better or worse, I would have hung in forever.

The effects of witnessing each person reiterate their commitment and the narrative of devastation wreaked by infidelity were felt in the common bond and the participatory consciousness experienced within the group. “Participatory consciousness [is] not ‘about’ something or someone; [it refers] to ‘being with’ something or someone” (Heshusius 1994:19). Each participant had navigated the territory from commitment, through infidelity, to an acceptance of the inevitability of divorce. This journey necessitated a radical restructuring of identity, as discussed in Chapter Three. The discovery of a new way of being can be likened to what Kornfeld (1997:82) describes as an “unfolding identity formation”. Emma, Abigail and Darron’s words capture the gradual unfolding of acceptance and healing, in the presence of sadness:

Emma – For all the positive growth that has emerged, I still yearn for the ‘whole’ family that we were, and when I see other families together, I am sad.

Abigail – The pain and sadness will always be there, I think. It just does not cripple my thought process these days. The sharing of our experiences, painful and sad may they be, allowed me to rethink and reflect and visit areas that perhaps I had not dealt with.

Darron – I think it would be fair for me to say that while the anger is diminishing and I am leaning towards forgiveness I think there will always be days where there is an element of sadness, but that’s okay, there are lost dreams, there are lost hopes and I think, especially now with Shannon, a strong sense of the broken family, but more and more I am seeing the philosophy of people come into your life and they leave and its okay – people come and go and its okay – be happy for what you have, we did have some very good times together and its just a sense of what will be will be, that’s what I tell myself, and its okay.... When I saw people getting divorced, I didn’t have a clue what was involved emotionally, and now I see from a completely different view.

The narratives above highlight the awareness of the migration of values and identity. This awareness has been stimulated by bearing witness. All three narratives contain an echo of sadness, a sadness that was once foregrounded and capturing of attention, has now receded into the background, still present, but no longer foregrounded, or preferenced. Emma speaks of “the yearning” but also of “the positive growth.” Abigail confirms that bearing witness has “allowed

me to rethink and reflect” and Darron explains that his strong hold on commitment has given way to an understanding that some relationships are “for a season.” In this way Darron reviews the membership of his “club of life.” Darron clarifies that the new understanding of the emotional effects of divorce emanates not only from having experienced divorce, but also from listening and from witnessing the narratives within the pastoral therapeutic gatherings: “and now I see from a completely different view.”

Making the transition from a position where commitment was strongly held, to a new position where divorce becomes an acceptable option, is easier when the journey is not taken alone. The witnesses became non-judgemental companions on the journey, sharing their own and each other’s experiences, in life-giving, affirming ways.

#### **4.3.5 Shifting paradigms – an invitation to think and see differently**

According to Kotzé (2002:9) Kuhn “argues that whenever a paradigm can no longer provide answers for the problems people encounter, a new paradigm comes about that is able to provide answers”. A narrative approach is about migration: migration from a dominant, problem saturated story (for example a story of infidelity and divorce) to the development of an alternative, preferred story and a re-authored identity. “The act of living requires that we are engaged in the mediation between the dominant stories and the alternative stories of our lives. We are always negotiating and interpreting our experiences” (Morgan 2000:9).

Societal discourses impinge on and try to subjugate the lives of people who are divorced (Skidmore 2002:17). Social construction theory, postmodernism and contextual theology are “discourse-sensitive” (Collins (cited in Lowe 1991:44)). The narrative approach undergirding this research incorporated an ethical curiosity, where the socio-cultural, contextual factors were highlighted by focusing on discourses about infidelity and divorce. My ethical position as researcher and pastoral therapist joined me with the subjugated and marginalised and against oppressive and exploitative practices. Graham writes of the participatory process as a collaboration in challenging oppressive discourses and negotiating ways of living ethically accountable lives (1996:137). “Deconstructive conversations” (Wolfreys 1998) involve asking questions in such a way that “taken for granted” understandings (discourses) can be deconstructed or taken apart with the objective of creating greater understanding and greater

meaning for the individual and the group. Deconstructive questioning “invites people to see their stories from different perspectives, to notice how they are constructed, (or that they themselves are constructed), to note their limits and to discuss that there are other possible narratives” (Freedman & Combs 1996:57). White (1997:59) comments: “In our narrative practices we do not have to be restricted to the reproduction of the dominant forms of individuality of western culture”. In the pastoral therapeutic gatherings we engaged in deconstructive conversations that became “transformative dialogue[s] in which new understandings [were] negotiated together with a new set of premises about meaning” (Gergen 1994:250). Darron’s final comment (see 4.4.4), “and now I see from a completely different view”, is a testimony to the transformational power of narrative and of compassionate witnessing, and of the human capacity to re-evaluate the events of our own and others lives in the context of new and different meaning.

The group noticed a gender difference in initiator status. Both males, Darron and Robert, were betrayed and divorced by their wives. Their wives “drove” the process, forcing separation and initiating legal divorce proceedings within a short space of time. Both Abigail and Emma were betrayed by their husbands, but both Emma and Abigail were eventually the initiators in the legal divorce process. Witnessing these narratives had a powerful effect on Darron:

What threw me tonight, I always, this is bad, I put people who drive the process on that side of the room, and me and Rob on this side. And now I am going, oops, I have to rethink all of this, because here I can see your pain and your hurt and the journey you went along is very hectic and traumatic and yet, on top of that, you still had to get to a point where you had sufficient strength within yourself, and clarity, you talked about, you used the words, to turn it around in your mind, to actually now drive the legal process, to serve the papers on him, it has actually forced me to try and see it from the other point of view, to try and understand for a slight degree to see what it was like for my ex-wife to get to that point, for whatever reasons she had to do that as well, here I can see, although you were the hurt party and the other party was definitely wrong you also had the strength and determination and courage and will to see the process through, and I have always feared that archetype person. I have to rethink the whole initiator thing now.... I think it was a matter of time before I would have driven the process. I was on the road but it wasn’t within her time frame.

Abigail shares her wonderings and insights after witnessing the conversation with Robert, and speaks of the positive effects (the sense of agency and self respect) of being an aware and active witness:

A huge new insight was reflecting on how B. might see the divorce and when HE stopped loving me and committing to the relationship. Was he ever really committed to the marriage? This I am beginning to wonder. The affirmation from the group has been good for me and empowered me. This feedback has given me a sense of self respect.

Witnessing brought Robert new insight and a glimpse of the resilience of the human spirit:

The exposure to the stories left me with two main views. One was the incredible lengths people went in their endeavours to preserve their marriages – well beyond the call of duty. In that they are to be commended. In this process I have come to realize that in all likelihood there was probably nothing that I could have done to avoid the outcome of the marriage. Secondly, despite all the turmoil, despite the hardships faced it appears that people have resilience to be able to recover from these harrowing stories. They all appear to have emerged stronger having been through the tempering fire of adversity.

Joan has been separated for two and a half years but is not yet divorced. Witnessing evoked a number of new insights:

I have been made aware of several things:

I think that emotionally I left the marriage long before it ended (after the first affair a few years before). I deserve more than just ‘going through the motions’. I am intensely loyal, faithful and trustworthy and I want and deserve the same. I finally see a real need for closure.

#### **4.3.6 The journey metaphor – the ‘moving on’ discourse**

Weingarten advocates becoming aware, active and compassionate witnesses so that change can take place on individual, family, community and social levels. Blomquist (1986:171) echoes the challenge:

And so the divorce experience can confront people with brokenness, limits, sinfulness and changing concepts of meaning. It can challenge them to move to new places, to choose life in a new way. And it can lead to the celebration of healing and life which comes with a rebirth out of death. And whether or not the seeds of rebirth germinate is partly the responsibility of the larger community of faith.

With reference to the rite-of-passage and journey metaphors discussed in Chapter Three, White (2002a:16) speaks of the third stage of reincorporation as:

New ground that can feature novel understandings of life and identity, a modified sense of self, a different appreciation of life, new sensibilities, and fresh proposals for directions in which one might proceed in life.

The participants confirm these insights as they give final voice to their experience of witnessing and its impact in creating “new ground”:

Joan – What surprised me most was that I could go through my whole journey and not feel traumatized, over-emotional, or weepy. I realized I have moved on emotionally and I get stronger, and the pain gets weaker, day by day. Where I see myself in the journey is near the finishing post. Although the divorce has yet to be finalized, for me most of the race has been run.... I have a sense of excitement and new beginnings in many ways. I entertain the possibility that in the future I will be open to new relationship.

Abigail – I am ready to move on, would like to date (Yes!!) and feel that I have moved from victim, to wounded healer!! I would like to volunteer to help at divorce workshop at our church.

Emma – Before this project began, I felt as though I was in a good space. I had come to terms with the situation, at last, and felt empowered by the divorce itself. That all remains the same post-project, but I have gained insight into other’s experiences, for which I feel richer. What has been highlighted for me has been the fact that we are constantly growing and being shaped, our perspectives are changing.

Darron – But it’s just that letting go, but I have to be honest with you, for myself, but as I think about it, as I did this morning at 2 o’clock, there is a sense of sadness as I see myself moving on and it’s bothering me less. Do you understand? – It’s a weird juxtaposition, I’m almost sad that I am not sad anymore. Does that make sense? (Murmurs of assent from the group). Cause I see myself going down this road, I go but I’m actually feeling okay about this, and ah, I must feel sad – its crazy – how do you explain this to somebody? Coming on for two years and finding myself in a new relationship, I think I am on the road towards healing, rebuilding my self confidence, self esteem and sexual confidence, redefining myself.

#### **4.4 REFLECTIONS ON THE WITNESSING EXPERIENCE**

As evidenced by the extracts above, the participants shared and responded with open hearts, becoming compassionate witnesses to themselves, and to each other. A “healing circle” was created which became a container for the pain and sadness, and also for “an alchemy of inspiration and solace” (Weingarten 2003:196). The group experienced something of Turner’s (1969) “communitas” as described by White (2000:77) - that unique sense of being present to each other in entering liminal circumstances, betwixt and between known worlds. In this “healing circle” two elements of compassionate, aware, intentional witnessing contributed significantly to the re-authoring of identity – re-membering and listening.



The section 4.3.1 contained a discussion of re-membering in terms of the “club of life” metaphor. Re-membering, according to Myerhoff’s definition, contributes to the production of multi-voiced identities for it is through re-membering that “life is given a shape that extends back in the past and forward into the future” (White 2000:70). Thus, re-membering is a rich metaphor when we reflect on the effects of witnessing. Infidelity and divorce separate people from vital aspects of themselves, producing disconnectedness from feelings, beliefs, values and commitments, as well as disconnection from family, friends and local communities. This disconnection was clearly visible in the narratives of the participants (see 3.4.2).

When people are witnessed by others, or when they witness themselves, re-membering takes place, as parts that have been scattered, shattered and forgotten are brought back together (Weingarten 2003:196). Re-membering restores possibilities, invites hope, and provides opportunities for engagement with others in the generation of rich descriptions of the stories of their identity (White 1997:62). Re-membering opens options for action that were not available before.

When Joan reconnects with strength through this witnessing journey, pain is no longer foregrounded and the option of dating becomes available to her. A migration of identity takes place as Joan re-members parts of herself which had been obscured by the presence of infidelity. Landscape of identity is interwoven with landscape of action as Joan states: “Where I see myself in the journey is near the finishing post.” Joan has been able to witness herself within a group of faithful spouses. This has enabled her to track her movements and pin her location on a migration map in her mind’s eye, whilst redefining her identity. In re-membering Joan has also been able to privilege knowledges and skills of living that had been forgotten in the presence of the problem-saturated story. Weingarten (2003:197) describes how listening allows the speaker to “drop down into herself”:

Listening as a foundational skill for intentional, compassionate witnessing requires a willingness to be touched. For that to happen we have to open our hearts as well as our ears. This kind of listening is non-judgemental and accepting. It gives space and time for the other person to drop down into herself to see what is there that wants to be brought forth. It creates an opportunity for the speaker to plunge into confusion and uncertainty, knowing that she will be accompanied by a steady companion who will listen to her story without taking it over.

Listening as a witness involves keeping the speaker at the centre. The listener does not interrupt with their own thoughts, feelings, understandings or meanings. Being listened to and listening in this way has a profound effect as listener and speaker join in a collaborative process. In the telling and in the listening, speaker and listener begin to feel in relationship with one another. For people who have been through the trauma of infidelity, being listened to in this way “is like being thrown a life preserver in choppy sea. The life preserver is a connection to another person [or group of persons]: the experience of aloneness abates” (Weingarten 2003:199). When witnesses offer their reflection and resonances, conversational space is opened for the development of alternative meanings and preferred identity for both speaker and witness. In this way both are “moved” into new territories of identity, as they carry a different awareness of themselves than they had before. This is confirmed by Emma as she reiterates: “What has been highlighted for me has been the fact that we are constantly growing and being shaped, our perspectives changing.”

#### **4.5 CONCLUSION**

Each act of witnessing presents the opportunity to both receive and to give a gift. We are able to say: “Your journey has been seen, your suffering and resilience have been honoured. Hearing your story has changed me.” Poststructuralist understandings account for identity as a social and public achievement, shaped by historical and cultural forces, and negotiated within social institutions (such as marriage) and within communities of people. Re-authoring of identity comes when our preferred stories and identity claims are witnessed and responded to by a significant audience (in this instance, the community of faithful spouses). During the course of the six weeks the participants became a community. Where there had been aloneness and isolation, a sense of solidarity, a common bond made its presence felt. As lives previously marginalized became centred the community became an audience. Self reflexive consciousness contributed to active, aware, compassionate witnessing – witnessing self, and witnessing each other. Bearing witness led to profound new understandings of gender difference, new understandings which invited empathy and care and brought healing and hope. In joining as witnesses the participants became a community of care and concern. Positive steps were witnessed and acknowledged. In being witnessed the participants found themselves and their stories worthy of honour and respect. These “evenings of respect” contributed to a shift in identity as values, dreams, intentions, commitments and hope were articulated, witnessed and reflected upon.

In the final chapter I reflect on the effects this research journey has had on me as researcher and on how it has opened up new *ways of being* (Reinharz 1992:211) as a pastoral therapist working in the field of marriage, infidelity and divorce. It has been a rich journey for which I am indebted to my co-travellers. The final chapter includes the voices of Darron, Robert, Joan, Emma and Abigail succinctly expressing what this research journey has meant to them.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **THE JOURNEY'S END: GLEANINGS FROM THE RESEARCH JOURNEY**

#### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

At the beginning of this research journey I expressed an interest in “exploring the identity constructions and reconstructions of the so-called ‘faithful spouse’ in the face of infidelity and divorce”. In the light of the “cura animarum” which guides my work as narrative pastoral therapist, I was also curious about the pastoral needs of people facing the emotional scarring and negative identity conclusions engendered by infidelity and divorce. This interest and curiosity led me to formulate the research curiosities and aims as expressed in Chapter One:

The first research curiosity is an exploration of the effects of infidelity and divorce on the identity of the faithful spouse. The second curiosity is an exploration of how a narrative therapeutic approach helps to inform pastoral therapeutic gatherings with faithful spouses. Flowing from the research curiosities, are the following research aims: 1.) To provide a narrative therapeutic group context (pastoral therapeutic gatherings) in which the effects of infidelity and divorce on the faithful spouses’ identity could be made visible, and 2.) to explore the effects of witnessing the stories of infidelity and divorce in a group of faithful spouses.

This journey has thus been a quest, an exploration and an adventure and it has taught me many things about the effects of infidelity and divorce (see Chapter Three), the effects of telling one’s story, and the effects of witnessing and being witnessed (see Chapters Three and Four). I am profoundly grateful to my fellow-explorers and co-researchers – Joan, Emma, Abigail, Darron and Robert – for their companionship and for their courage in being prepared to risk this research journey with me. As bell hooks (1994:74) writes: “It is not easy to name our pain, to theorise from that location, it takes courage to ‘expose wounds’ and to lend one’s experience as a means to ‘chart new theoretical journeys’.”

In this final chapter I clarify what I have learned during this research journey. These insights relate to the research curiosities and aims (see 5.3), the intricacies of doing participatory action

research (see 5.4) and further curiosities which have made their presence felt (see 5.5). Reinharz (1992:211) writes: “Being a researcher-traveler [sic] means having a self and a body. It means abandoning the voice of ‘disembodied objectivity’ and locating oneself in time and space.” This means that whilst I refer to the research conversations and relevant theory, in this chapter I write very much in my own voice. As feminist participatory action research is concerned with creating new realities and facilitating change to the benefit of the participants (McTaggart 1997:7), this chapter also discusses the effects of the research journey on the participants (see 5.2).

Winter (1996:27) argues that “writing up a report is an act of learning and, in this sense, we write for ourselves so that, when we read what we have written, we find out what, in the end, we have learned”. Within a post-modern epistemology truth is not singular or universal, rather, local communities construct their own truths, their own meanings and these are known as “local knowledges”. Throughout this research journey my co-researchers and I have co-constructed our own local knowledges. This chapter elaborates on the discoveries made: insights which serve a purpose for me as a pastoral counsellor, and also realizations which the participants may be able to use on their journeys into the future.

## **5.2 THE PARTICIPANTS GIVE VOICE TO THE EFFECTS OF THE GROUP CONVERSATIONAL JOURNEY**

In Chapter One I wrote of my ethical commitment to a participatory action research process that would ultimately be primarily of benefit to the participants (see 1.7.1). I have come to realize that whilst I was embarking on a research journey (exploring the effects of infidelity and divorce on the faithful spouse, and exploring the efficacy of a narrative approach) on another level the narrative approach to the pastoral therapeutic gatherings allowed the participants to re-search their own journey in the presence of witnesses. By revisiting their histories and telling their stories of infidelity and divorce in the presence of witnesses who had experienced a similar “plot” and landscape, they were engaging, not only in the research journey, but in their own autobiographical research. On our last formal evening together the participants reflected on what the research journey had meant to them. Their voices follow, unedited, so that the reader may “hear” what I as researcher heard. This reflection is therefore not limited to my interpretation of what was said. These extracts reveal the transformative effects experienced by the participants

during the research journey as they researched and retold their histories of the effects of the infidelity and divorce on their lives and identities.

Robert – Although we are diverse people with diverse experiences, there is the commonality of experience which is far stronger, and we have all experienced it very intensely, and it has had a profound impact on our lives, our whole life, that is the commonality. It has been a valuable experience to exchange that, the area that we all share, the experience, the feelings, the pain. Even though I went through the infidelity and divorce 13 years ago, this has changed my perspective, it's been beneficial. It has crystallized things in my mind and I have benefited from that. I have realised that there was probably nothing that I could have done to avoid the outcome of the marriage.

Joan – What's been bad: Just possibly being rendered vulnerable again as I recognize and remove certain barriers I've set up to protect myself emotionally. Should probably be under the 'what's been good' heading?! For me it's been a really wonderful experience. I have really enjoyed this – if you can say you've enjoyed sharing everybody's pain? I have gained so much from listening to each of the stories. I have found this very helpful. I feel grateful and blessed.

Darron – I am so amazed, that in spite of our suffering and pain, we have been able to share at such a deep level, quite quickly, in spite of being strangers. And I think it's because of the commonality of the intense life experience that we have had, that we were immediately able to connect. It gives us the ability to relate to one another at a very particular level. This has changed my life; it's a huge stepping stone in terms of me moving on in my life. For me, it's been hugely empowering. What it's done, it's allowed me to leave here every Monday night feeling very, very empowered and realizing just how far I've moved down the road. And just as Joan has taken away something from every one, so have I: in terms of identifying with a similar experience, or in being able to resonate with your life experiences, when I walk away I remember that you guys have walked down the same road as me – you guys have survived – I'm going to survive.

Emma – It's been very intimate sharing. I feel honoured to have been part of what everyone has shared. Especially from the minute we walked in here, I think because you just managed to create a safe space somehow – thank you for that – it's been positive for me. I am just really grateful for the experience, for what I have heard and for what everyone has shared. I have gained insight into other's experiences for which I feel richer. What has been highlighted for me has been the fact that we are constantly growing and being shaped, our perspectives changing. I am trying to respect myself by putting myself first a little more ...

Abigail – I wanted to say again at the end of reflecting on this course and the notes sent now, how this experience has given me such a new insight into how men battle in divorce, it has given me such compassion for the father in a marriage that loses out when the children stay with the mother post divorce. Darron and Rob's evenings were particularly powerful for me ... seeing the other side of the coin. Because of the shame, nobody, not even my closest soul-mate, knew what was going on in my marriage.

Sharing has been healing for me. I know that I am moving on. I have become very real in the last while. Thank you, thank you all.

There is a richness of experience in the participants' voices. The narrative therapist/researcher is interested in "panning for gold", looking for "miniscule traces of meaning – the tiny, precious shards of struggle, defeat and victory that reveal a life" (Wylie 1994:40). As I reflected on these comments and on the territory travelled, and not just the territory, but the way in which we travelled together, I became aware of a number of "nuggets", gleanings from the research journey.

### **5.3 EXPERIENCING TRACES OF TRANSFORMATION AND MAKING DISCOVERIES DURING THE JOURNEY**

The first collection of nuggets relates to the second of the research curiosities: "how a narrative therapeutic approach helps to inform pastoral therapeutic gatherings with faithful spouses" (see 5.3.1) and the second collection of nuggets refers to the first of the research curiosities: "an exploration of the effects of infidelity and divorce on the identity of the faithful spouse" (see 5.3.2). However, because of the interwoven nature of the curiosities it has often been impossible to separate the discoveries into two distinct streams. Traces of meaning relating to each of the curiosities may therefore be found in each of the dedicated sections.

#### **5.3.1 How a narrative therapeutic approach informs pastoral gatherings**

Reflecting on the comments of the participants (see 5.2) led to an exploration of the second research curiosity. What contributed to the positive experience enjoyed by the participants? What was it about the narrative approach that worked? Would a modernist approach have achieved a different result? In "sifting" through these curiosities three "nuggets" relating to a narrative therapeutic approach emerged: Firstly the importance of caring connection (*koinonia*) which relates to the sharing (talking and listening, exchanging of experiences); secondly transformation through meaning making (which relates to the "telling of stories"); and thirdly acknowledgement (of self and other) which emanates from the act of compassionate witnessing – both the act of witnessing and being witnessed.

### **5.3.1.1 Re-authoring of identity through caring connection (koinonia)**

The narrative therapeutic approach facilitated re-authoring by enabling the story tellers and witnesses to “connect” with each other. Infidelity and divorce cause separation – separation from self, separation from spouse, separation from friends and separation from children. Both Darron and Robert spoke of the distress of being separated from their children and of being disconnected from the daily events of their children’s lives. They missed being part of a family and felt “single”, isolated and alone. Robert’s loneliness was exacerbated by geographical distance when he moved to Cape Town from Johannesburg. Darron spoke about receiving support from friends, but he still felt that nobody really understood what he was going through. He also spoke of the trauma of waking up alone each morning, feeling bereft and desperate: “But the bottom line is – apart from the likes of therapy and the likes of the support group – you still go home alone, you still wake up in the morning alone.”

Emma spoke of the pain of being neglected and forgotten by friends; she referred to these separations as “soul-destroying”. Joan, too, spoke of never having felt so alone in her life. Abigail named shame as the reason for her silence, and silence breeding disconnection, isolation, and aloneness (“nobody, not even my closest soul-mate, knew what was going on in my marriage”). When we are silent and alone it is difficult to define, to conceptualise and language our understandings, for as Gergen (1994:186) explains: “[N]arratives of the self are not fundamentally possessions of the individual but possession of relationships – products of social interchange.”

The pastoral therapeutic gatherings offered social interchange amongst peers, peers who had all been through unique, yet similar experiences. Both Robert and Darron referred to the “commonality” (of experience). Robert highlighted the importance of “exchanging” or sharing: “It has been a valuable experience to exchange that, the area that we all share, the experience, the feelings, the pain.” Joan highlighted the “sharing of pain” and the “listening” as very “helpful”. Emma referred to the “intimacy” experienced in the gatherings and speaks of the importance of having “been part of what everyone has shared”. Darron also spoke of the importance of “relate[ing] to one another”. Abigail equated the “sharing” with the “healing”. Becoming part of a group where there was common ground (or a common “plot” in the telling of stories) managed to break the sense of isolation, aloneness and marginalization.



Abigail commented on the effects of the narrative approach informing the pastoral therapeutic gatherings: “This worked well and added an ‘evening of respect’ for each participant, by giving them the floor and the time without being deflected by others comments while they were being interviewed.” This comment highlights Abigail’s movement from the shame which kept her silent to a new experience of respect as she found her voice and her story was witnessed.

The pastoral therapeutic gatherings offered a sacred space and time for breaking the silence, and in the sharing, *koinonia* made its presence felt. *Koinonia* is a Greek word with no single definition – the word embraces the notion of fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation, sharing and intimacy. Ironically, *koinonia* has also been used to refer to the marriage bond as it suggests a powerful common interest that can hold people together. The first usage of *koinonia* in the Greek New Testament is found in Acts 2:42-47 (Richards 1985:275-276). An implication of action is included in the meaning of the word.

Participating in a group of people who have all navigated similar territory strengthens and supports the development of new ways of thinking, helps to build trust in new found realities, and opens and supports new ways of being and doing (as when Abigail began dating and Joan made the decision to promote divorce proceedings). A new life, a preferred identity becomes possible after divorce. In this way the journey from “separation”, through the “liminal space” and into “re-incorporation and rebirth” manifests itself. The pain of separation heals in the light of caring connection as became evident in the pastoral therapeutic gatherings. When asked what she would want to tell a pastoral therapist, Abigail said: “Encourage clients (whether they are the faithful or unfaithful spouse) to connect and meet with other people who have been through and ‘survived’ affairs as well as those who have not, and where divorce has resulted.” Joan responded to the same question with this answer: “I don’t really have anything constructive to offer in this regard – I am just personally very pro the ‘group narrative format’ we used.” When asked what she had gleaned from the journey that she would want to share with other “faithful spouses” in the face of infidelity, Joan responded that she would “highly recommend counselling, especially group therapy – sharing the ‘journey’ with other ‘travellers’ is liberating, healing and helpful”. Joan’s comments highlight her own re-membering of self-esteem and self-worth, and acknowledge the liberating, healing and helpful effects of experiencing *koinonia*.

### 5.3.1.2 Transformation through meaning making

The narrative therapeutic approach facilitated transformation, as it allowed the participants to co-construct new meanings which contributed to the re-authoring of their identities and lives. Meaning making is transformative: identities, behaviour and lives are changed when new meaning is birthed (White & Epston 1990:3). Transformation is evidenced in the voices of the participants (see 5.2). Implicit in the transformation is the opening of new possibilities for action, new ways of living: Joan travelled overseas to visit her son and opened conversations with her husband regarding divorce; Abigail bought a new home closer to her work and began dating; Emma started a new business and Darron contemplated getting married again. Three “nuggets” contributed to transformation through meaning making: opening space for the telling of painful stories without re-traumatisation taking place, supporting the participants in relating to the past (rather than being lost in the past) and the participants’ engagement in reflecting on both journeys travelled (the research journey and their own journey through the landscapes of infidelity and divorce).

Firstly, transformation happened when space was opened for each person to tell their story of infidelity and divorce in a way that they could make new meaning. In order to enable this conversational process I adopted a position of inquiry (Carey & Russell (2003b:61). I was interested in tracking the history of the problem, whilst being aware that I did not want to re-create trauma. This involved preferencing my pastoral participatory heart, whilst lightly looking through the research lens. In this way attention was centred on the participants and their stories rather than on a research process.

I engaged in conversation with each person in the pastoral therapeutic gatherings in front of the group of faithful spouses (the witnesses). I did not have a list of pre-prepared questions. Reinharz (1992:21) writes of “phenomenological interviewing” as “an interviewee-guided investigation of a lived experience that asks almost no prepared questions”. The questions I asked were curious, respectful and tentative and were informed by something the participant had just said. In this way I followed through on my ethical commitment to a research posture that was dialogical, decentred and not-knowing (see 1.7.2) and opened space for the participants to tell their stories in their own way.

I knew that telling stories of infidelity and divorce would evoke distress (see 1.7.1), but I also knew that if the line of inquiry was shifted too quickly from the distress the participant might have felt “not heard”, or that their suffering was being discounted. When distress is dwelt on re-traumatisation sometimes takes place. Discernment is required when navigating the “line of questioning” in therapy and research. In the conversations I paid particular attention to the body language, tone of voice, pace of speech, facial expression and breathing of the person being interviewed, vigilant for signs of distress. Every now and again I would also visually scan the witnesses, in an effort to gauge their emotional response to what they were witnessing. Abigail’s comment about “evenings of respect” speaks to me of participants knowing that they had been “heard and respected”, rather than “cut short and discounted”. The sharing of the pain does not appear to have resulted in re-traumatisation: rather, it appears to have contributed to *koinonia*, transformation and making meaning.

Secondly, the meaning-making occurred as we explored the past whilst remaining in the present. As I asked questions, weaving back and forth over time, between past, present and future, an experience of movement was created which challenged the participants to experience their lives as evolving, rather than static. In this way the journey and rite-of- passage metaphors were particularly helpful.

A narrative approach is a facilitative process which supports people in relating to the past, rather than feeling “lost in the past” (Bird 2000:xiii). As we tracked back and forth along the “time line” of the infidelity and divorce narratives, the conditions which supported and strengthen the participants’ ideas of self and the conditions which weakened and undermined their identity were exposed. For example, many of the participants found counselling to be particularly helpful; often the advice of family members and friends was found to be counterproductive. This “tracking” enabled the participants to map the effects of the problem on their lives and identities (highlighted during the separation phase), whilst also enabling the recognition of their influence over the problem (especially during the liminal and re-incorporation phases). All of the participants remembered and identified defining moments, unique outcomes, moments of movement, change and self-determination, some of which challenged their ideas of themselves, as discussed in Chapter Three. Curious, tentative questioning sometimes uncovered the steps leading up to the defining moments, discoveries and self-knowledges which now inform present action and options for life; discoveries which otherwise might have remained lost in the past.

Thirdly, transformation occurred as the participants made new meaning as they reflected on both journeys travelled: the research journey and their journey into their past, researching their history as autobiography. By revisiting their histories and telling their stories of infidelity and divorce in the presence of witnesses who had experienced a similar “plot”, “miniscule traces of meaning – the tiny, precious shards of struggle, defeat and victory that reveal a life” (Wylie 1994:40), became the catalyst for the co-creation of an alternative story of identity.

Abigail spoke of the importance of reflecting on the journey as part of the meaning-making: “I wanted to say again at the end of reflecting on this course and the notes sent now, how this experience has given me such new insight.” Reading and reflecting on the notes of the sessions reminded Abigail of what had taken place and thickened the description of new meanings and new ways of being. Morgan (2000:99) confirms: “Whereas the intricacies of a conversation can so easily be forgotten, therapeutic documents can be referred to over and over again. Each reading can act as a retelling of the alternative story, and this in turn contributes to new possibilities.” I consider the tapes and transcribed notes to be the property of the participants, and when this research project has been completed each participant will receive a bound copy of the dissertation and audiotape recording of “their” evening.

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### **5.3.1.3 Re-authoring of identity through the compassionate acknowledgement of self and other experienced in witnessing and being witnessed**

The effects of witnessing were discussed in detail in Chapter Four. One of the key underpinnings of narrative practice is that our identities are formed in relationship with others, that our concept of our self is a product of social interchange (see 5.3.1.1.). It was for this reason that this research project was designed around the concept of pastoral therapeutic gatherings, rather than one-on-one interviews. When a person navigates the territory of infidelity and divorce and endeavours to author new stories about their life, witnesses are required, witnesses who can powerfully acknowledge and authenticate the steps taken, the skills and knowledges this has required and the intentions and hopes involved. Within the pastoral therapeutic gatherings the witnessing provided an opportunity for the linking of lives and acknowledgement of shared themes and values. In South Africa, outsider-witness practices seem to fit well with the concept of “ubuntu” – a way of living that emphasises the relationship of care between people (see 1.6.2.2). Ubuntu was

experienced in the pastoral therapeutic gatherings as the participants bore witness to themselves and to each other.

Bearing witness is a simple practice of having been brave enough to sit with human suffering, acknowledging it and not fleeing from it. Being witnessed doesn't make the suffering go away, as the participants discovered, but it sometimes changes the meaning attributed to the experience of pain and grief. In bearing witness, the participants turned toward each other, and were willing to let their hearts and minds be touched. In witnessing they saw and listened to each other, and in the process they listened to themselves, and found themselves being visited by memories of their own. As resonance and reverberations were experienced and articulated and reflected upon, re-authoring took place.

When Joan witnessed a conversation about the "cost" of divorce she spent much time reflecting on what she had heard, and the following week she recounted how much the separation from her husband was "costing" her emotionally. As Robert bore witness to Emma's story, seeing her many efforts to save her marriage, he reflected on his own narrative and came to a different conclusion to the one he had been holding for many years. For Robert witnessing finally allowed him to lay "demons" to rest.

In being witnessed Emma found respect. In her feedback she wrote: "It has been beneficial to me to have been able to share with two men – and two women – who have respected me in that I had a story to tell." Darron regarded the witnessing experience as "empowering" and as offering a promise of survival. In acknowledging how he was moved by what he had witnessed and explaining why that was, Darron acknowledged "resonance and transport" (Carey & Russell 2003a:8). For Abigail bearing witness to the men's suffering invited new meaning and compassion: "This experience has given me such a new insight into how men battle in divorce, it has given me such compassion for the father in a marriage that loses out when the children stay with the mother post divorce. Darron and Rob's evenings were particularly powerful for me ... seeing the other side of the coin." In bearing witness the group developed compassion for each other and compassion for themselves.

In this section entitled "Experiencing traces of transformation and making discoveries during the journey" I have attempted an exploration of a number of nuggets which contributed to an

understanding of how a narrative therapeutic approach helped to inform the pastoral therapeutic gatherings. In the second aspect of this section an attempt is made to explore key findings (nuggets) relating to the effects of infidelity and divorce on the identity of the faithful spouse.

### **5.3.2 An exploration of the effects of infidelity and divorce on the identity of the faithful spouse**

During this research journey I discovered that when infidelity appears (whether it is visible or not, whether it is acknowledged or avoided, whether it is named or denied) it has a profound impact on the identity of the faithful spouse. In my reflections on the research conversations described in Chapters Three and Four, I discussed some of the effects of infidelity and divorce on the identity of the faithful spouse. Here I add a further level of reflection by highlighting three discoveries which will inform my work as pastoral therapist.

#### **5.3.2.1 Self-blame, failure and idealisation**

When infidelity is first made visible the faithful spouse appears almost immediately to be overwhelmed by an internal, accusatory voice of self blame. “What did I do wrong?”, “What could I have done differently?” Robert (see 3.4.2) speaks of the “recriminations”, the “why, why, why, what did I do wrong” that haunted him for years. Abigail said that initially she felt that she “couldn’t keep this man faithful to me”, implying that she was responsible for his fidelity. Only after her husband had engaged in multiple affairs did Abigail reach the defining moment when she was able to shift some of the self-blame (see 3.4.2). The self-blame is often exacerbated by loyalty to the spouse, and by the urge to hold on to the idealised picture of the spouse. Darron (see 3.4.2) says “he chose to ignore” what was happening. At another time he confessed “I actually knew from that July, but for six months I chose not to believe that, to tell you the truth. I specifically chose not to find out who it was or to investigate.... I also liked to think that Gill wouldn’t have an affair. It was dealing with too much.” On the first evening of the pastoral therapeutic gatherings Joan spoke of the loyalty she still felt to her husband (see 3.2) and the idealised picture she had had of him during the marriage – he had been her “knight in shining armour” (see 3.4.1). When Emma discovered the infidelity she also thought that it was her fault.: “I think I believed I was the cause of all this, I was guilty, I had driven this man to this point, and this man of all people, this man who was so stable, so wise, he was on a pedestal for me.”

In the separation phase (journey/rite-of-passage metaphor), separation does not only refer to separation from the unfaithful spouse, it also means a surrendering of the “taken for granted” identity of the unfaithful spouse. It means “waking up” to the reality of what is taking place, it means becoming aware of what is usually unquestioned (faithfulness, trust, commitment, same values), it means deconstructing assumptions about the spouse, about life and the world. Holding onto the idealized picture of the spouse entails holding onto self-blame. When the faithful spouse is able to let go of the idealization, and allows the picture they hold of their spouse to go through a “radical disturbance of identity”, then their own lens shifts and they are able to see themselves differently. This does not need to involve “bashing” or denigrating the unfaithful spouse, it means being able to see clearly and to be able to say what Hilary Clinton said when she discovered her husband’s infidelity: “I believe what my husband did was morally wrong” (Clinton 2003:470) (see 2.3.2). White (2002b:14) writes of the importance of “naming”. “I have always believed this naming to be important, because how we think of these experiences ... how we accord these experiences meaning, contributes very significantly to how we receive them, to how we take them in, and to how we respond to them.”

From the first evening of the pastoral therapeutic gatherings when Joan gave voice to her loyalty, she helped to set the tone for the gatherings. We agreed in the group, on that first evening, that respect would be a central value and that we were not gathering to lambaste the unfaithful spouses. In this way the gatherings became “evenings of respect” as self respect claimed its place from self-blame, rather than self-blame becoming blaming of the other. Emma commented: “I think if the other participants had been wallowing in self-pity or feeling very negative, the rewards would have been diminished for me.” The narrative approach which underpinned my position as facilitator/researcher, with an ethical commitment to respect, resulted in our attention being drawn to the development of preferred identity claims and alternative stories, to a constructive focus that contributed to the value of the journey.

### **5.3.2.2 Refined by the fire of infidelity and divorce**

I discovered that harrowing as the journey through infidelity and divorce is, all of the participants emerged stronger, more aware of themselves and with a more robust sense of self. The liminal space thrust the participants into a reconsideration of established understandings of life and identity. In the re-authoring conversations we engaged anew with previously neglected aspects of

their experiences of life, questioning what was taken for granted and exploring considerations of personal, relationship and community ethics (White 2002a:12). This attention to the attribution of meaning and emphasis on the acknowledgement of movement is linked to the post-structuralist sentiment that is associated with narrative practice. As pastoral therapist and facilitator of re-authoring conversations I hold an awareness of significant ethical responsibility.

Entering the stage of reincorporation and rebirth involved honouring the sadness of lost hopes and dreams for the marital relationship, whilst articulating a sense of liberation and re-membering of self. Darron describes the meaning he has made of his experiences:

So in some ways I value my life experiences because I think it's made me a lot deeper, more sensitive and more reflective and introspective, perhaps a person with more integrity, definitely a better teacher.

Robert spoke of having “been through the fire” which resulted in him feeling “invincible” and “more competent to deal with relationships” (see 3.4.3). Abigail felt she could use her experience to “help other people” (see 3.4.3). The katharis evidenced in this time of “rebirth” lead the participants to new perspectives on their lives, history and identity, to think beyond what they would routinely think, to make new meaning of experiences not previously understood and to initiate steps into territory not previously contemplated. White (2002a:16) writes of the time of reincorporation as “new ground that can feature novel understandings of life and identity, a modified sense of self, a different appreciation of life, new sensibilities, and fresh proposals for directions in which one might proceed in life”. More is written about transformation in 5.3.3.1.

### **5.3.2.3 The double blow of betrayal and loss**

When infidelity appears and seduces the unfaithful female spouse, the effects on the faithful male spouse are different, in some ways, to the effects on a faithful female spouse. I discovered that men suffer a double blow: First they are betrayed and lose their wives and then, secondly, they lose custody and sharing in the day to day life with their children. A “stripping” takes place as the male ego crumbles and impotence becomes a lived reality. Impotence refers not only to sexual performance (or the lack thereof) but also to the loss of hope and frustration with the South African justice system. The faithful male spouse finds himself to be a victim of a system which does not offer him protection and which does not listen to his story. It appears to be automatic



that custody is granted to the mother and joint custody needs to be negotiated. The radical disturbance of lifestyle contributes to the radical disturbance of identity.

#### **5.3.2.4 The effects of initiator status**

Another gender difference of interest in the pastoral therapeutic gatherings related to initiator status. Robert's and Darron's legal divorces were initiated by their unfaithful female spouses within a very short period of time post separation (see 3.4.2). Both Abigail and Emma, after prolonged periods of infidelity, eventually chose to initiate divorce proceedings. As this is not a quantitative or modernistic study I will not extrapolate this interesting finding; extensive further studies would need to be done to explore this phenomenon (see 1.1). What is of import to this study is the effect on the identity and life of the faithful spouse, when betrayal and loss is compounded by having divorce inflicted, rather than chosen. Darron and Robert suffered triple blows: betrayal, loss of family and disempowerment in the legal process. Re-authoring and rebuilding of life and identity began post-divorce. Emma and Abigail, through counselling and reflection, worked through the commitment versus divorce dilemma, and arrived at a place within themselves, where agency became available, a decision was made, and legal action was taken. At the time of the legal divorce, much of the grieving had already been done and re-authoring had begun.

#### **5.3.2.5 Opening space for God-talk and exploring the effects of faith position on identity**

Joan, Abigail, Emma, Darron and Robert all spoke (some spoke at depth, some merely mentioning) their faith positions and church involvement (see 3.4.3). As a pastoral narrative therapist, and as a woman of faith, I find myself uniquely positioned in a spiritual and psychological milieu. People who consult with me in my private practice have often searched for years to find a therapist who offers a conversational, therapeutic space where they can speak of their personal relationship with God, a therapeutic space where God talk is not constrained. Joan spoke openly in our conversation about her relationship with God:

I had a strong sense of God. I used to lie awake at night and have these thoughts, real, vicious, terrible thoughts, and by the morning I was over it. It was almost like I had ranted to God and then in the morning I had peace. I feel very content now, I am at

peace. I definitely feel it is through the Bible studies I have done and through a very strong sense of God's grace in my life.

According to Griffith (1995:124) the psychotherapy culture may influence a therapist/counsellor to impose proscriptive constraints, whilst the religious counselling culture may influence a therapist to impose prescriptive constraints. The influence of either proscriptive or prescriptive constraints can close the doors on understanding how God-talk and religious ideas contribute to a person's problem-saturated story or to the alternative, preferred story. In the pastoral therapeutic gatherings, keen to avoid either prescriptive or proscriptive constraints, I found myself caught in a tension which resulted in an "avoidance" which I later regretted as I realised I had been restrained in opening up the conversational space for more God-talk. I missed opportunities to facilitate meaning making and "thickening" of faith narratives, and opportunities to deconstruct the effects of religious discourses on identity as when Darron confessed: "I'm not the best example of a Christian."

Informal conversations whilst we were drinking tea often led to "rich" discussions about the constitutive effects of religious discourses and accompanying biblical prescriptions on infidelity/divorce narratives and on the participants' attitudes to dating. The attitude of respect within the group allowed the participants to articulate their own positions without fear of interruption or censure, and without imposing their values on each other.

From reflecting on the gleanings of the research journey I turn my attention to the discoveries gleaned in the process of doing research.

## **5.4 REFLECTIONS ON DOING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH THROUGH THE THERAPEUTIC LENS OF A POSTMODERN NARRATIVE APPROACH**

### **5.4.1 Introduction**

In this section I describe what I have learned about participatory action research, and specifically about the relevance of a narrative approach in doing participatory action research. According to Wolcott (1992:52) we become competent at research only by engaging in it and reflecting on it. Three specific insights emerged as I reflected on the journey, as I wrote the dissertation and as I entered into conversation with my supervisor. I have already described my theoretical orientation

with regard to doing research in Chapters One and Two, but I will supplement the descriptions of my insights with relevant theory where possible.

#### **5.4.2 The map is not the territory**

Participatory action research has taught me that a research journey can never be planned ahead in terms of fixed aims (Denzin & Lincoln 1994:2). The remark by Alfred Korzybski, “The map is not the territory”, encapsulates my experience of doing qualitative, participatory action research (Bavister & Vickers 2004:6). It was useful for me to have a map of the research journey in mind (see 1.6.2), as it offered me a loose framework to guide the beginning steps of the journey, but it in no way prepared me for the unexpected twists and turns as I navigated the lived experience of the “territory” of participatory action research. An example of an unexpected twist and turn (where the map was not the territory) is the “story” of sampling.

Ideally, I wanted a mixed race and mixed gender group. Reinharz’s words (1992:12) found resonance in me: “As a white woman, I feel it is my responsibility to learn as much as possible about racial diversity and interracial attempts at mutual understanding.” As discussed in Chapter One my initial preference was to have a group of volunteers, people with whom I had no previous history. I wanted a minimum sample size of six, preferably eight. None of this was to be. A participant, who had agreed to be in the study, was going to be away at the time the group met, and did not want us to delay the process until her return. Two other participants, of different gender and race, could not commit to a six week process as they had evening work and child-care commitments. The group was eventually made up of five participants, three female and two male. Only two were volunteers, three were invited to participate. Two were already known to me. In the end, none of these preferences seemed crucial to the outcome, although two recommendations emerge from the discussion above.

In her feedback, in answer to the question: “Any suggestions, comments, observations?” Abigail confirmed: “Equal number of men and women to get an absolute balance of feelings and perspectives.” I endorse Abigail’s perspective and the first recommendation is that future groups contain an equal gender mix, because of the richness of experience of hearing both genders tell their story. “The question of *difference* is one with the question of *identity*” writes Reinharz (1992:3) quoting Bologh, a U.S. sociologist, highlighting the need for awareness of dominant paradigms within different cultures, race and gender. A second recommendation is that future

groups be culturally diverse as this would enrich understanding regarding different constructions of monogamy, infidelity and divorce. I offer these emerging ideas as recommendations, not as prescriptions. I am aware that some people may feel inhibited in sharing with members of the opposite gender, or cross-culturally. In the initial one-on-one interviews before the group process participants' preferences could be explored. Understanding that "the map is not the territory" highlights the need for flexibility and participatory consciousness.

### **5.4.3 Participatory ethical care and consciousness**

At the outset of the journey I articulated several ethical considerations which were to constitute my compass as I negotiated the research journey. The lens of participatory consciousness meant that I saw myself and the participants as fellow travellers. I was determined to do no harm, whilst being aware of katharsis (see 1.7.1). Another ethical commitment was to retain a researcher posture that was dialogical, decentred, not-knowing, transparent, accountable and reflexive (see 1.7.2).

#### **5.4.3.1 Researcher stress and the commitment to do no harm, participatory consciousness and katharsis**

At the outset of the research journey I was very aware of the danger of re-traumatisation as the participants gave voice to their stories (see 1.7.1.). I was naïve in not preparing, indeed not thinking, of the extent to which my own emotions would be disturbed. Listening to the narratives was harrowing for me. Each week, as I re-listened to narratives on audiotape, with headphones, transcribing, I was acutely aware of each indrawn breath, every sigh, every tear, and every subtle nuance of emotion. I struggled with exhaustion and feelings of deep sadness during the six week process.

When I embarked on this research journey I knew katharsis would take place and that we would all be changed, transported to places we could not have imagined (see 1.7.1). I wrote about katharsis as the movement that takes place in "witnessing powerful expressions of life's drama" (White 2002a:14). Reinharz (1992:37) citing anthropological researcher Reinelt's experience illustrates the link between meaning-making and katharsis:

Meaning emerges through interaction.... The anthropologist interprets what the informant says, articulates that experience to the informant, to which the informant again responds. This process of interpretation and clarification creates meaning and understanding between those engaged that leaves neither of them unchanged.

Reinhelt's experience is comparable to my experience as researcher, adopting a narrative approach to participatory action research. In the re-authoring conversations with the participants meaning and understanding was co-created, leaving none of us unchanged. In being vigilant about the possibility of the re-traumatisation of the participants, I had underestimated the effects on myself as researcher, facilitator, interviewer and witness. At the outset of the research I had only been aware of "researcher stress" as pertaining to the academic process of data gathering, recording and writing. I had no idea that researcher stress would emanate from listening to the stories. It was the ethic of commitment which enabled me to keep going, to stay focused, and to "bracket" my emotions. It was not only the pain and trauma which moved me; I was also profoundly touched and inspired by the resilience and courage evidenced in the narratives.

#### **5.4.3.2 Researcher stress and its effects on the dialogical, decentred, not-knowing, transparent, accountable, reflexive researcher posture**

Mouton (2001:151) cautions that a main source of error in participatory action research is due to "researcher effects (overly emotional or subjective involvement)" and so I was very aware of not wanting my emotions, prejudices and assumptions to influence the research process. I had also thought it necessary to withhold my emotion from the group as I asked myself "what right do I have to be so affected?" Weingarten (2003:14) writes of this reason for holding silence: "For many of us it is difficult to give legitimacy to our own suffering as witnesses when the victims clearly suffer more." Weingarten's words provided me with the encouragement to give voice to the effects I was experiencing by seeking support from my clinical supervisor, Dr. Lynn Edwards. In this way I was able to develop a more compassionate relationship with my self, becoming a compassionate witness to myself, as well as to the participants. I had to learn to care for myself during the journey, as my silence did not allow the group to care "with" me. It was only on the last evening that I disclosed that at times I had found the listening and transcribing harrowing.

Considering my ethical stance of transparency, I ask myself: Should I have done it differently, should I have given voice to my struggles? A narrative approach does invite the researcher to “consult the consultants”. Although I initially opened space for the group to ask me questions (see 1.7.2) as we journeyed I could have checked with the group if they wanted further self-disclosure. Hudson (2000:95) experienced a similar dilemma: “[A]s the research journey unfolded, I became uncertain as to ‘the extent to which reciprocity in disclosure is desirable’ (Limerick et al 1996:456)”. Reinharz (1992:34) cautions: “[R]esearchers who self-disclose are reformulating the researcher’s role in a way that maximizes engagement of the self but also increases the researcher’s vulnerability to criticism, both for what is revealed and for the very act of self-disclosure.” Other researchers (Webb, Melamed, Bristow, Esper) strongly advocate self-disclosure as an initiator of “true dialogue” (Reinharz 1992:33). As I reflect on the differing viewpoints and my lived experience I have no doubt that researcher discretion and discernment are key factors, and aspects such as knowledge of the participants, the timing of researcher self-disclosure and the degree of disclosure are of the utmost importance. These were influential factors in my role as researcher/facilitator engaging in a narrative approach to participatory action research.

There is a second issue around transparency that warrants discussion: the concept of withholding “expert” knowledge. In Chapter One I stated: “It was important to me to remain in a dialogical, decentred, but influential and ‘not-knowing’ position. The ‘not-knowing’ position invited me into a participatory mode of consciousness. I saw all the participants as experts in their own lives, with their own local knowledges (lived experience).” I was also very aware of my position as a married person, as an outsider to the experiences of infidelity and divorce. This awareness coupled with my commitment to an ethical stance which incorporates the attitude that “the client is the expert”, contributed to my withholding of what I thought the group could have perceived of as “expert knowledge”. Knowledge and input which the group would have welcomed! In response to the question “Do you think this is a viable model for a divorce-recovery programme?” Abigail wrote:

Yes definitely but would suggest a longer formal input or talk from yourself for participants to take home with them. We all enjoyed I think the discussions from you pre sharing where you gave us something positive to chew on or read ... even if we read these articles in the next few months and slowly.

Darron answered the question: What could have been done differently?

A set reading for every week that could be discussed.

These comments challenged me to reflect on how “holding back” took place and I have realized that to some degree “containment” made its presence felt, as I resisted offering input and information which may have had value to the group, and may have contributed to a richer collaborative relationship and dialogical process (Anderson 1997:107). I found the group to be very generous of themselves in their sharing and their witnessing. In contrast I was perhaps a little “stingy” in the sharing of resources and information, in my efforts to “care with”, rather than “to care for” the participants. In future I would be more flexible, more discerning, as each group would have differing needs, desires and responses. A narrative approach to participatory action research preferences egalitarianism rather than the scientific ethic of detachment and role differentiation between researcher and “subject”. In the area of self-disclosure and information sharing I erred on the side of scientific caution. Ironically it was a decision made from a narrative perspective, taken on the basis of breaking down power differences between “researched” and “researcher”, and not wanting to offer information from a hierarchical, expert position. I have come to realize that ethical participatory consciousness requires constant discernment. In future therapeutic and witnessing journeys there will always be a need to discern how, when and what constitutes ethical participation.

#### **5.4.4 Collaboration and community: Human text and written text**

Both participatory action research and a narrative approach highlight collaboration, participatory consciousness and joint decision making throughout the research process. I had hoped that the participants would join me, not only as co-researchers but also as co-authors of a reflexive text. Mason writes of conjointly reflecting on the research as it becomes written text, arguing reflexively and multivocally (2002:177). Mouton (2001:151) cites “‘ownership’ of findings” as a strength of participatory action research. When I completed the first draft of a chapter I would email it to the participants, asking for their comments:

I need to ask you to please read this chapter very carefully – I have used your comments, transcripts, written feedback, and I have done a lot of cutting and pasting. If you read any comments and feel they are quoted out of context or have been juxtaposed in a way which make you uneasy or uncomfortable PLEASE let me know. If you feel I have left

anything out or if you want to add anything please let me know. This is ‘our document’ and we are co-authoring it. All comments are very welcome!!

I did not receive any “critical” responses, amendments or suggestions. These came only from my supervisor, Prof. Dirk Kotzé. In my commitment to collaboration and participatory consciousness, I found myself with an ethical dilemma. However, when reviewing Rajeesh Tandon’s (1988:13) three determinants of authentic participation as discussed in Chapter One (see 1.6), this does not seem to be a major issue. I was aware of the participants’ active and informed roles in setting the agenda of the inquiry and their dynamic and vocal participation in the data collection. We were all aware of the emerging themes (commonalities, resonance and reverberations). Regarding Tandon’s third criteria (the participants’ control over the use of outcomes and the whole process) there has been no failure: I did present the opportunity for feedback, and it is possible that I received no critical feedback or corrections because the group felt that I had presented their voices in an authentic and respectful manner.

I now have clearer insight, that when it comes to data analysis and interpretation (see 1.6.2.3) and presenting the research findings (see 1.6.2.4), the text that is produced from the interpretations of the texts generated in the conversations with the research participants is the researcher’s story of their lives (Limerick et al 1996:458). Despite my desire to share power with the research participants in constructing new meanings, this dissertation is thus my story of the narratives of the participants, and is influenced by my various discursive positions. On receiving and reading the first draft of Chapter Four, Joan sent this response, which confirms this insight:

My gut reaction was to feel honoured to be part of this very relevant thesis. I feel proud to be the ‘Joan’ referred to, and am glad I used my name – important to me. I don’t regret anything I shared, feel I spoke from the heart, and nothing I said was misunderstood or misinterpreted by you (even if my grammar and coherence were a little ‘dodgy’ at times). *You presented our ‘painful experiences’ in a sensitive, dignified and caring way [emphasis mine].*

I came to the realisation that whilst I, as researcher, was constructing the written text, the participants continued to live their stories, and continued to “talk with one another”. Narrative conversations and a narrative approach to research view therapeutic gatherings as an “in there” together process, where people talk with one another and not “to” one another (Anderson & Goolishian 1992) (see 1.7.2). Hudson (2000:97), a qualitative researcher positioned in a narrative approach, made a similar discovery: “I discovered that ‘another’ research journey occurs as the



research participants and the researcher enter into each others lives, build relationships and foster community.” This “second level” of the research journey referred to by Hudson, extended beyond our research group of six. It had been my understanding at the beginning of the research journey that research for a Master’s degree was research done alone; in practice I discovered that I was in no way alone. This dissertation rests on the foundation of scholarship it has been my privilege to read, and the list of “works consulted” record the many scholars and writers whose work has informed mine. In addition I have enjoyed the support, encouragement and companionship along the way of my current co-students, Mari van der Merwe and Matthew Syphus. Past students, Trevor Hudson, Kim Barker, Iain Martin and Sue Skidmore have been “guiding lights” – their dissertations and our conversations and sharing of experience have been invaluable. My teachers, supervisors and editor, Elize Morkel, Elonya Niehaus, Dirk Kotzé, Lynn Edwards and Johan Myburg have invited and challenged me to navigate previously uncharted personal territory, and have opened up “new ways of being” for me as pastoral therapist for which I will always be profoundly grateful. This “naming” of my companions on the journey is reflective of my ethical commitment to acknowledge “transport” through “taking-it-back practices” as discussed in 1.7.1.

## **5.5 WHERE TO FROM HERE? FURTHER CURIOSITIES...**

Reinharz (1992:11) explains that feminist research “tends to be written in a way that reveals ‘the process of discovery’. Initial discoveries energize [sic] the scholar on her quest.” As the transformative effects of the research journey unfolded, both within the gatherings and in all our lives, and as I reflected and wrote, emerging ideas spawned a myriad number of contexts and possibilities within which narrative pastoral therapeutic gatherings could be efficacious, in addition to the continuation of this work. In the interests of brevity I elaborate on my vision for the model discussed in this dissertation and two further ideas.

### **5.5.1 Divorce recovery in the face of infidelity**

I would suggest that this particular model of divorce recovery does not replace existing models, but rather becomes an additional mode of pastoral care about 18 months after the event as this research journey has shown time to be a crucial factor (see 3.4.3). Existing models are useful as people navigate the territory through separation and legal divorce. The model offered in this research, according to the participants, was efficacious because there was a fairly lengthy time

lapse between the actual events and the telling of the story. In this way the story was not told out of the separation or liminal space, but out of re-incorporation and rebirth. Being able to look back, with the benefit of hindsight, greatly enhanced the ability to attribute significance to certain events, outside of the problem-saturated story, and to explore the link between events, across time, sometimes in a zig-zag, sometimes in a sequence, re-memembering forgotten knowledges of self, and making new discoveries. The participants saw their ability to tell their story of infidelity and divorce without experiencing retraumatisation, as evidence of the healing that had already taken place. When Emma agreed to participate she was apprehensive that it “would reopen things” but after our initial conversation, when I saw her at church a few days later, she said “actually the conversation was good for me, because it made me realize I have moved on.” Reinharz (1992:35) confirms this thinking: “I sometimes had to remind myself that the woman’s ability to retell a traumatic story meant she had already survived the worst of the pain.” The group was also able to join in sharing their experiences post-divorce and in telling their stories of new self-development. Emma could celebrate having her own bank accounts “which only I have access to” and having a new business about which “S. knows almost nothing”. Those who had already begun dating were able to offer support and encouragement to those who were entertaining the possibility of dating.

### **5.5.2 Breaking the “conspiracy of silence”: Pastoral care for infidels**

When I reflected on the intimacy and community which almost immediately made its presence felt in the pastoral therapeutic gatherings of faithful spouses, I wondered if the same effect could be enjoyed by a group of unfaithful spouses. This thinking was inspired by Abigail (see 5.3.3.2) and Botha (1998:385) who writes of the effects of the infidelity on the unfaithful spouse:

The unfaithful spouse experiences devastating loneliness and isolation and can talk to nobody except the lover. This isolation is caused by western society’s ambiguity towards extra-marital affairs. Western society is fascinated by romance and the idea of an extra marital affair. On the other hand, western society condemns it and shuns the unfaithful spouse. Hence the unfaithful spouse can only talk to the lover. This process sustains the extra-marital affair. It is of the utmost importance to be aware of the unfaithful spouse’s isolation and loneliness. The pastoral therapeutic conversation must be an open space where the unfaithful spouse can talk freely. The emotional intimacy that is co-constructed in the pastoral conversations must be superior to the intimacy in the extra-

marital affair – if it is attainable. In this way the pastoral therapeutic conversations free the unfaithful spouse from his/her isolation.

When unfaithful spouses are “shunned” it means they are silenced and marginalized, and if Botha’s supposition is correct, the intimacy enjoyed within pastoral therapeutic gatherings could stand against the “loneliness and isolation” and open space for other relationships besides the relationship with the lover. In my pastoral practice, over the last few years, I have had conversations with as many “faithful spouses” as with “infidels”. In my experience both seek therapy, both feel lost and isolated. I have not yet met a person, engaged in an extra-marital affair, who is content with their position. Again and again I ask the question: Is it possible for you both to stay in the marriage and continue with the affair? The answer, even after considered deliberation, is always “No”. All want resolution of the intra- and inter-personal conflict, all seek agency to respond in ways that invite peace, all wish to raise new possibilities for action and to navigate new territories of meaning making. If a narrative approach to pastoral therapeutic gatherings enables healing, a re-authored identity and new ways of being for a group of faithful spouses, I am hopeful that it would have similar effects for a group of “infidels”. Perhaps it would allow separation from “the problem” and invite the creation of new meaning? I repeat these words of Mouton (2001:151), originally quoted in Chapter One: “Most types of PAR (participatory action research) have an explicit (political) commitment to the empowerment of participants and to changing the social conditions of the participants.” Participatory action research, in the form of narrative pastoral therapeutic gatherings, has the potential to change the lives of the “infidel”, their families and their lovers. Both infidels and their lovers engage in secrecy and lies. Anderson & Foley (1998:7) contend:

When the stories we tell conceal rather than reveal our understanding of ourselves and our world, they isolate us from others. When, however, the aim of storytelling is to interact with others and identify common ground, stories have the potential to build authentic communities of shared meaning and values.

The “mistress” and the “lover” have had no voice in this dissertation. They too, are marginalized and shunned and kept voiceless and silent. I see them in my private practice. They also come, with stories of isolation, loneliness and disempowerment. Perhaps pastoral therapeutic gatherings would provide a safe space, an experience of *koinonia*, for them to give voice to their stories and to re-author new ways of being?

### **5.5.3 Pastoral therapeutic gatherings within local church communities**

Thirdly, I draw on Hudson's "emerging ideas" to consider the possibility that local congregations could use a narrative approach in those pastoral contexts where members tell their stories and listen to the stories of others (Hudson 2000:89). In conversation with a friend whose baby died six hours after birth she mentioned that being with certain people had been helpful. I asked her what it was that had been therapeutic. She told me that they had been through a similar experience and that this common ground had created a bond between them. She then spoke of her desire for another child and her fear of being pregnant again. I asked her if it would be useful for her to have a conversation with someone who had lost a daughter at birth, and fallen pregnant three months later. She replied that it would be, and I later arranged for her to meet with the person I had in mind. This conversation sparked the thought that where there is a life experience which evokes very deep pain, pastoral therapeutic gatherings, rather than individual therapy, may be beneficial. It is my intention and commitment to discuss this possibility with churches and ministers with whom I am already in relationship, and to offer training in the facilitation of narrative ways of opening space for therapeutic conversation in pastoral contexts.

## **5.6 CLOSING COMMENTS**

We stand today, in very different positions from those we held when we first met. We are not who we were. I want to close by acknowledging how much my own life, my faith and my understanding and experience of pastoral narrative therapy has been shaped by my conversations with Joan, Abigail, Emma, Darron and Robert. In the midst of pain and struggle I have witnessed quiet strength, courage and commitment bearing testimony to the indomitable human spirit and the power of faith. It is a gift I will carry with me always as I travel the myriad landscapes of pastoral therapeutic conversations.

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## **APPENDIX 1**

### **RE-AUTHORING NARRATIVES IN THE FACE OF INFIDELITY: A DIVORCE RECOVERY MINISTRY**

#### **Information sheet for research group participants**

Thank you for your interest in this project. Please read this information carefully before finalizing your decision to participate. Should you have any questions about the content of this information sheet, please do not hesitate to raise them with me.

#### **What is the purpose of the group?**

Currently I am in the process of completing a Masters in Practical Theology (with specialization in Pastoral Therapy) at the University of South Africa. In order to meet the requirements for this course, I must write a research thesis. My research focus involves a narrative approach to divorce recovery. This research journey aims to explore the identity experiences of the so-called 'faithful spouse' in the face of infidelity and divorce.

#### **Research participants**

I need five or six people to become research partners in this project. In order to meet the aims of the project I need participants who have experienced the end of their marital relationship through divorce, where the infidelity (physical unfaithfulness) of their spouse was a factor. I am looking for people who are willing to tell their stories of the effects of infidelity and divorce on their identity, within a group context.

#### **What will participants be asked to do?**

If you agree to take part, you will be asked for your consent to use the information discussed in the group sessions, for the study.

I will have an initial individual meeting of an hour with each participant. We will then meet as a group on a weekly basis for 6 weeks. Each session will last 1 1/2 hours. These sessions may be audio-taped. Following each session a typed summary will be either faxed or emailed to you for your verification and/or adjustment.

In the group meetings I will explore conversationally with each participant his/her personal story. During these conversations the rest of the group will form an audience. After each conversation the group will share their responses to what they have heard. While I do have certain areas of interest, the agenda for these conversations will rest finally with the research participants themselves.

At the first session we will discuss and clarify the rights of the research participants with regard to these conversations. These will include the rights of the participants to set boundaries for the conversations, not to answer any question to which they would prefer not to respond, and to terminate any line of questioning with which they are uneasy.

Should you agree to become a group participant, you will be asked to give your consent for the information gained during the group sessions to be used in the research document. Before this report is submitted, it will be made available to the participants for their comment. Strict confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained with respect to each participant's personal identity in the report.



## APPENDIX 2

### **RE-AUTHORING NARRATIVES IN THE FACE OF INFIDELITY: A DIVORCE RECOVERY MINISTRY**

#### **Consent form for group participants**

I have read the Information Sheet concerning the research project and understand its purpose. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can request further information at any stage.

I know that-

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary.
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time.
3. A copy of the final research document will be retained by the University of South Africa and by the Institute for Therapeutic Development.
4. I will receive no payment or compensation for participating in the study.
5. All personal information supplied by me will remain confidential and anonymous throughout the project.

I hereby confirm that I am willing to participate in this research project.

.....

Signature of participant

.....

Date

### APPENDIX 3

-----Original Message-----

**From:** Penny Joy Day [mailto:pjday@iafrica.com]

**Sent:** 29 May 2007 20:10

**To:** Abigail, Emma, Robert, Darron and Joan

**Subject:** Reflections

Dear Emma, Robert, Abigail, Robert and Joan

Thank you to you all for your very active participation – your inputs and your listening, your reflections and your “stories”. I have attached the opening comments from week 1, thought it might be helpful for you to refer back to see what you were feeling and hoping for at the beginning of our time together. Here are some questions which may help in your evaluation of the experience. These are just a guide for your reflections, suggestions, you may choose to answer some of them, none of them, all of them.

What worked for you?

How did you feel about the format (eg. interview, reflecting team)?

What was difficult?

What did the process ‘open up’ for you?

How did you see yourself before this research project?

How do you see yourself now?

What was illuminated/brought into the light for you? Were there any new insights?

What surprised you?

Where do you think you are in the journey?

What has been re-incorporated?

What has been most beneficial for you? (eg mixed gender group, safety, being able to talk about sex, the common bond, the list is endless.....)

Did re-traumatisation take place?

Did healing take place?

Do you think this is a viable model for a divorce-recovery programme?

Any suggestions, comments, observations?

What could have been done differently?

What hopes and dreams do you have for your life now?

What have you learned about yourself, about your values?

I look forward to seeing you on Monday,  
Penny